VII
Tearmoon Empire
Nozomu Mochitsuki
Illustrator: Gilse

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Characters

Tearmoon Empire

ARCHNEMESIS

GRANDDAUGHTER AND GRANDMOTHER

Mia

Protagonist. The sole princess of the empire. Ex-selfish brat. Actually a coward. A revolution leads to her execution, but she somehow leaps back through time and wakes up a twelve-year-old again. She successfully avoids a repeat encounter with the guillotine, but then Bel shows up...

Miabel

Mia's future granddaughter who leapt backward through time. Goes by "Bel."

REVOLUTION

ARCHNEMESIS

Outcount Rudolvon's Family

Ludwig

Young, motivated government official. Sharp tongue. Ardently believes in Mia and is trying to make her Empress.

ARCHNEMESIS

Anne

Mia's maid. Born into a poor family of merchants. Mia's loyal subject.

Tiona

The eldest daughter of Outcount Rudolvon. Looks up to Mia. In the previous timeline, she led the revolutionary army.

Cyril

Tiona's younger brother. Super smart.

Dion

The strongest knight in the Empire. In the previous timeline, he was Mia's executioner.

Sapphias

The eldest son of the House of Bluemoon. Got into the student council thanks to Mia.

The Four Dukes' Families

Ruby

The daughter of the Duke of Redmoon. A gallant lady with a wardrobe to match.

Citrina

The only daughter of the House of Yellowmoon. Bel's first friend.

Esmeralda

The eldest daughter of the House of Greenmoon. Self-proclaimed best friend of Mia.

※ ——— Future Timeline Relationship

※ ····· Previous Timeline Relationship

Kingdom of Sunkland

Keithwood

Prince Sion's attendant. A cynic. But a competent one.

Sion

Assistance

Crown Prince. All-round genius. In the previous timeline, he was Mia's archnemesis, aided Tiona, and eventually became known as the "Penal King." In the present, he accepts that Mia is the Great Sage of the Empire.

[Wind Crows] Sunkland's intelligence service.

[White Crows] A team within the Wind Crows formed for a certain project.

Holy Principality of Belluga

Support

Support

Rafina

The Duke's daughter. Saint-Noel Academy's student council president and the school's de facto decision maker. In the previous timeline, she supported Sion and Tiona from behind the scenes. Her smile can be lethal.

[Saint-Noel Academy]

A super elite school attended by all the highborn children of neighboring nations.

Kingdom of Remno

Abel

Second Prince. In the previous timeline, he was known to be an extraordinary playboy. Now, as a result of meeting Mia, he works to diligently improve his swordsmanship instead.

[Forkroad & Co.]

Chloe

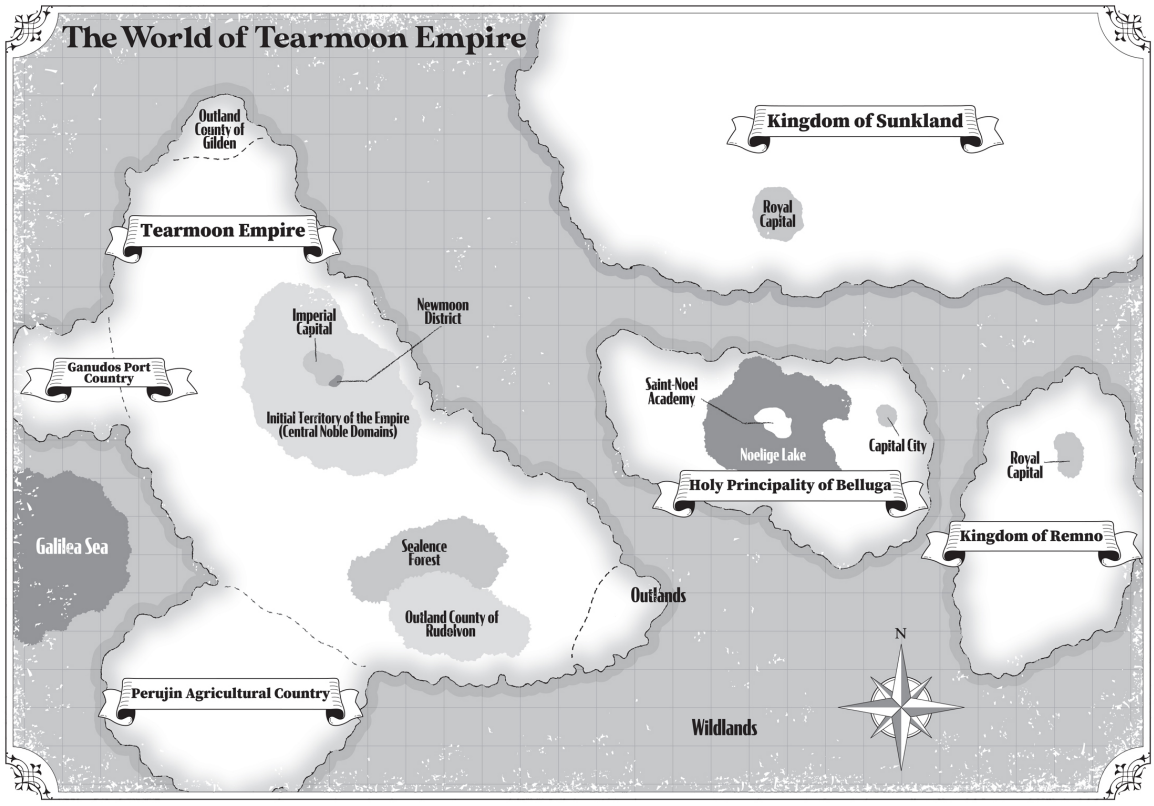
The only heir of Marco Forkroad, whose company spans multiple kingdoms. She is Mia's classmate and book buddy.

Chaos Serpents

A group of chaosmongers trying to wreak havoc upon the world. They are deeply hostile toward the Holy Principality of Belluga and the Central Orthodox Church. Traces of their clandestine misdeeds can be found throughout history, but the details are shrouded in mystery.

Story

Mia, the reviled selfish princess of the fallen Tearmoon Empire, is executed, only to wake up a twelve-year-old again after somehow leaping backward through time. With this second chance at life she, resolves to fix the ills that plague the Empire... so she doesn't end up at the guillotine again. With the help of her previous life's memories and a healthy dose of overly-generous interpretation of her actions by those around her, she successfully averts a revolution, only to be told by her time-leaping granddaughter, Bel, that in the future Mia's entire lineage will end in ruin and she herself will be assassinated. In order to avert this grisly fate, it seems necessary for her to become Tearmoon's first empress...


The World of Tearmoon Empire
Outland County of Gilden
Kingdom of Sunkland
Royal Capital
Tearmoon Empire
Imperial Capital
Newmoon District
Ganudos Port Country
Saint-Noel Academy
Noelige Lake
Capital City
Royal Capital
Initial Territory of the Empire (Central Noble Domains)
Holy Principality of Belluga
Galilea Sea
Kingdom of Remno
Sealence Forest
Outlands
Outland County of Rudolvon
N
Perujin Agricultural Country
Wildlands

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Part 3: A New Oath Between the Moon and Stars
III

Chapter 1: Princess Mia's Festival of Debauchery (Part A) —Is This Gluttony? No, It's Principle—

On the night of the Holy Eve Festival, Mia had survived a dangerous conspiracy that began with Bel's kidnapping and ended with an attempt on her life. Then, she successfully rescued Citrina. And then, she engaged in a formal discussion of profound historical significance in the Yellowmoon manor. After all that, she immediately hit the road again.

Now, Mia sat with chin in palm and elbow on sill as her carriage trundled toward the imperial capital Lunatear. There was a somberness to her expression.

"Oh, look, milady. Lunatear's coming into view," said a delighted Anne, who hadn't been back in quite some time.

Mia smiled at her enthusiasm, but on the inside, she was still mulling over her conversation with Lorenz.

When all is said and done, it looks like we're still a long way from getting to the bottom of all this.

He'd mentioned the existence of a high priestess of the Serpents, who presumably had their bible, *The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth*. But that was it. All they'd really learned in the end was that these things existed. That hardly counted as progress. Had Lorenz involved himself more deeply with the Serpents, he might have managed to extract more information, but he admitted that he'd been questionably compliant from the very beginning, so he never had a chance to see the high priestess in person.

"Moons," Mia lamented. "I wonder how long it'll be before we can make some real headway against the Serpents..."

"Milady?" Mia looked up to find Anne's worried face mere inches from hers. "Is something bothering you?"

"Oh, uh... No. Nothing is bothering me," said Mia, her hasty smile

clearly evasive.

Then, she thought better of it.

Actually, I've been making Anne worry a whole lot lately, haven't I? Maybe I should just be honest with her... She couldn't shake the feeling of her guilty conscience, so she decided to speak her mind. "Actually, Lord Yellowmoon gave us some rather troubling information that highlighted the enormous scope and mysterious nature of our enemy but revealed nothing else helpful. Basically, we got a much better look at how tough this is going to be, but we made no progress toward solving it. It's really quite depressing."

"Milady..."

Anne fell silent for a moment, but soon shook her head and gestured encouragingly at Mia with her fists.

"Give yourself some more credit, milady. Miss Citrina is safe and sound now," she said with conviction. "If it hadn't been for you, neither Miss Citrina nor Lord Yellowmoon would have been saved. So please, be proud of what you've accomplished. You have every right to be."

Mia reflexively glanced at the two carriages behind hers. In one rode Citrina and Bel. The former was thoroughly exhausted from her struggle against Barbara. Bel, ever the thoughtful one, had volunteered to ride in the same carriage and provide her weary friend with some company.

Hm... I see. She has a point. Maybe I'm being too pessimistic about the situation. The fact that we managed to rescue Rina should be enough of a victory. In fact, that was the original goal, so I should probably just consider the information we gained to be an extra freebie.

She'd saved her friend, with whom she'd bonded over foal and fungus, from certain death. Moreover, she'd made an ally of Duke Yellowmoon. The Tearmoon nobles he'd been secretly sending abroad were apparently talented individuals too, and if they could be called back, it would surely be a boon. Considering that the age of the great famine was fast-approaching, these were decidedly heartening developments.

And I got to eat some delicious tarts and cookies...though I would have preferred to have another cookie or two. Eh, scratch that. Another five or six, at least.

Mere seconds after entertaining this line of thought, she immediately felt her worries fade and her mood brighten. In case anyone has forgotten, *not*

dwelling was one of Mia's strong points.

"Good point... Yes, worrying about it won't solve anything." Mia smiled again at Anne, this time with earnestness. "Thank you, Anne. I feel a little better now."

"Any time, milady. After all, such a long face doesn't suit you."

"All that's left, then...is to see if Rafina can pull some information out of Barbara once she gets there... Oho ho, sermons every day... I can just imagine how much she'll hate— Hm?"

The familiar cityscape of the capital suddenly leapt into view, only now it buzzed with a palpable energy. Vendor stalls lined the sides of the main street. Buildings had been decorated. There were also more people walking around. The busy capital was ever bustling, even more than usual.

"Ah... Preparations are already underway, I see."

It would soon be time for the Tearmoon Empire's year-end event that defines its winter—Princess Mia's Birthday Festival. Work had always proceeded smoothly during the days leading up in previous years, and this year seemed no different. The festival proper would take place over five days, making for a lavish celebration to which a great many nobles from neighboring kingdoms were invited. Many of whom, by the way, Mia would have to meet and greet personally. Being the indisputable protagonist of the festival, she was always very busy.

She'd always found this aspect of the experience a tad unpleasant. Running from noble to noble, listening to all their wishes and blessings... It was, frankly, sort of a pain. At least, she *used* to think that. Now, she knew what an exceptional luxury it was to receive such treatment. To have her birthday celebrated by so many people and fill her stomach with so much delicious food... It was pure, unqualified bliss. And it was something she'd never have realized back when the unfailing regularity with which high-quality cuisine was delivered to her fingertips was something she completely took for granted.

Therefore, Mia's tendency to stuff her face with food was not, in fact, due to gluttony. No, what she practiced...was appreciation! How could she leave food uneaten, knowing its value? Indeed, it was not gluttony but *principle* that drove her to devour all the contents of her plate. As a devout practitioner of F.A.T., she afforded her foods the utmost respect by consuming them all with gratitude.

As a steadfast observer of non-leftoverism, her own birthday festival was naturally a joyous occasion that she should be thankful for...but there was also an aspect of it that caused her some distress.

It's...such a terrible waste...

Mia knew that during her birthday festival, she'd be greeted by mountains of food wherever she went, the vast majority of which would be thrown away after her departure. In attending to her numerous invitations, she'd end up going from place to place, leaving a trail of wasted food in her wake.

Why did this happen? Because nobles were creatures of vanity. They believed that the amount of food with which they welcomed her—and by extension the amount they squandered thereafter—demonstrated their power and generosity. During this time, every Tearmoon noble would vie for supremacy in this absurd game, each trying to outdo the rest through lavish banquets and exorbitant feasts. Everyone was committed to celebrating her birthday, but everyone was also determined to demonstrate to the emperor and Mia that *they* celebrated the hardest.

Speaking of which... How many times back then did I wish we could have somehow gotten back all the food we threw away during these festivals? Too many, that's for sure...

Like an old friend, a memory from the previous timeline greeted her. She let it fill her mind, bringing her back to half a year before she was captured by the revolutionary army.

That day, Mia had been in the middle of an idle stroll through the palace. As she looked upon its various features, she let out a deep sigh.

"The Whitemoon Palace has always been so beautiful... I never thought there'd come a day when it would look so...beaten and abandoned."

A lone figure accompanied her, walking a few paces behind. It was the young bespectacled minister Ludwig Hewitt. He watched as she stepped out onto a balcony and looked down on the capital's sprawling panorama. A panorama that elicited yet another deep sigh from her.

"The capital is in pretty poor shape too," she bemoaned.

"The biggest problem is that the people see no future," said Ludwig. "From the great famine to the plague, then the civil war with the Lulu Tribe, followed by riots throughout the land... Despair looms so tall that no bright

future can be seen behind it. People are losing the will to live and succumbing to their worst, most self-destructive tendencies."

As Mia listened to Ludwig's grim depiction of the present state of things, she quietly murmured, "How could this have happened...? Just two years ago during my birthday festival, there was so much food everywhere that we had to throw most of it away... We had *so much* food... Where did it all go?"

Now, she barely had enough to eat herself. She was Hungry Hungry Mia, every single day.

"All I can say is...the realization that there exists no magical urn from which food flows indefinitely...came a tad too late..." Ludwig wearily shook his head. If only there had been more nobles who understood this simple fact...things wouldn't have gotten as bad as they did.

"Grrr... I won't blame them for eating a lot, but making so much extra food just to throw it all away? Wh-What a terribly wasteful thing to do! What was I thinking, letting them get away with that? Ugh, that was definitely the biggest mistake of my life. Sweet moons, I wish I could go back in time and talk some sense into them."

Mia ground her teeth in frustration. Ludwig regarded her for a moment, then shrugged.

"Even allowing for the feat of temporal travel, the feasibility of such a proposition is, in my opinion, doubtful. Sure, if they all had knowledge of the future, they would probably listen. But they did not. No one knew a famine of this scale was going to occur. Would it really be possible to persuade people when they do not have this crucial prescience?"

"Well, if it's me telling them to, then yes. What, are they going to defy a direct order from me? I'd like to see who has the guts to try it."

She glared at Ludwig for emphasis, but he simply shook his head again.

"His Majesty issued an imperial decree that nothing but the finest celebration would be suitable for Your Highness's birthday. Your words bear weight, but surely not more than your father's, yes?"

At that, he paused, falling into a meditative silence. A thought had occurred to him. A trifling thought, more entertainment than exploration, for it was a classic "what if" scenario. In this case, however, it might hold value. He could certainly refute Mia's argument through the cold, uncompromising hammer of pure logic, but what could be gained by doing

that? Better to make more constructive use of this conversation they were having.

With his mind made up, Ludwig finished composing his thoughts.

"With that said, though...if one does not directly refute the wishes of another, but rather prod those wishes toward another direction, then perhaps what you suggest is possible..." he said, sparing a glance at her as he spoke.

This, too, was a part of his educational program. In the future, when it was time to start rebuilding the empire, Mia would be faced with countless negotiations, each likely more difficult than the last. And she'd have to attend them all in person. Normally, this would be unthinkable. No empire would send its princess across the continent running from conference table to conference table. That was what ministry officials were for. Or the chancellor. Or a powerful noble. Whoever it was, it shouldn't be the princess.

But these were no normal times. If a problem could be solved by the princess's presence, there was no question that she'd have to show up. Furthermore, despite her grumbling, Mia never showed any true disdain at making the effort to travel and seat herself at the negotiation table. For all her faults, she always listened to Ludwig and did what she could to comply with his requests. Well, she made the *attempt* to do so, at least. Because of that, he would always in spite of himself end up looking forward to seeing her grow as a person and providing her with the pedagogical support needed to realize that growth.

"Hmm, I see, I see... Prod their wishes toward another direction..." she mumbled, crossing her arms in a way that ostensibly suggested she was deep in thought. "So, what exactly are we supposed to do?"

Ludwig gave her an oblique look.

Frankly, it's not a particularly meaningful observation, but I suppose there's some value in the process of arriving at it. It should help develop a habit of mental inquiry. Granted, either way, she'll get plenty of practice soon enough. Once the empire recovers from this crisis, there will be no shortage of situations that shall require her to use her head.

So he thought. But sadly, it was not to come. The future he'd imagined, in which his careful instruction bore fruit and Mia's grudging but steady efforts at brainwork would be rewarded...burned away in the revolution's flames, leaving only cindered flakes to coat the cold, mournful dew on the

guillotine's blade.

But even then...it wasn't all for naught.

The words they traded that day would persist as a memory in the mind of a girl in a carriage. Those unrequited wishes of times bygone yet lived on today in Mia's heart.

Hmm... I see. He had a point. I'm imagining myself in that situation right now, and I can see how "be more frugal" is going to be a tough sell. Trying to persuade father...feels like a dead end too. Augh, but I can't just watch them waste all that food. There must be something *I can do.*

Mia racked her brains.

The best way to prevent food from going to waste is to eat it all myself...but honestly, it's just too much. Especially for a light eater like me. Aaah, curse this small stomach of mine!

Forced to abandon this method due to her supposedly small stomach, she kept thinking...and thinking...and craving sweets...and thinking some more...

"Prod their wishes toward another direction, huh? In that case..." she murmured as an idea came to her. "Yes... If what they want is a chance to show off how much money they're willing to spend, why not just—"

Just then, the carriage stopped in front of the Whitemoon Palace.

"Ah, we're here."

She glanced at the carriage behind her. The one carrying Citrina and Bel had gone its separate way mid-journey, bound for Anne's former home where the rest of her family lived. That was a preventative measure; the Emperor must not be allowed to see Bel in person. The other carriage followed her here. Inside were the two princes, Abel and Sion.

They ended up accompanying me all the way here. Basic courtesy dictates that I owe them a proper reception. All right, then. Time to make some arrangements.

The pair had not only gone to the Yellowmoon manor with her but also agreed to celebrate her birthday with her by attending the upcoming festival in person. Delighted to have them present, Mia was all fired up to give them a lavish welcome. Unfortunately, she was so eager to start preparing the reception that she failed to account for the possibility of a trap waiting for her in the middle of the capital. It lay in wait right in front of the palace and

ended up catching her completely off guard. As she walked up, it sprung its villainous existence upon her with all the deadly impact of a blade bound for her neck.

On the next episode of Tearmoon Empire, Mia dies before the Whitemoon Palace!

...Due to humiliation.

Chapter 2: Princess Mia's Festival of Debauchery (Part B) —The Light of Hope and the Miraculous Memory—

"Oh? My, this is..."

The Whitemoon Palace was in the midst of a visual transformation in preparation for Mia's birthday festival. Large pieces of resplendent cloth were draped over the palace walls, across which the name Mia Luna Tearmoon was embroidered in big, bold letters. That was fine. It happened every year, and she was used to it. The problem lay elsewhere. Rather, it *stood* elsewhere.

White, imposing, and standing almost as tall as the palace itself...was an enormous statue of Mia!

"What...?"

She stared at it with a twitching grimace.

Wh-What in the moons is that *supposed to be?!*

Worse yet...

"Come on, you need to carve off a little more around that part or it won't bring out Mia's charm. And make sure to be especially careful over *there*. Notice how it's nice and round, with a bit of pudginess to it? Yes, that's essential! It's so very Mia-like. Make sure you don't mess it up."

The on-site supervisor was none other than His Imperial Majesty and current emperor of the Tearmoon Empire, Matthias Luna Tearmoon himself. Mia watched in abject horror as her father fought vigorously at the front lines, braving sand and flake as he pointed fingers and shouted orders.

She gulped. Feeling a sudden warmth in her cheeks, she quickly hopped out of the carriage. A quick glance backward revealed Abel and Sion to be in the midst of debarking as well, but they'd have to come later. First, she needed to take care of the problem in front of her.

She hastily stomped her way toward the emperor who, hearing her

approach, looked in her direction.

"Oooh, Mia, you're back!"

With a smile like a summer morning, he ran over.

"Greetings, Your Majesty. I have returned," said Mia.

She performed an exemplary curtsy. Despite its flawless execution, Matthias was not pleased.

"Moons! *Your Majesty*?" He grunted with visible displeasure. "You hurt me, my dear darling daughter. Call me 'dad' like you always do! Go on now. Let me hear you say *dad*."

"Ugh, da—I mean—augh! I do *not* call you dad all the time. Would you stop making things up already, *father*?" she shrieked, red-faced.

This was, after all, a public space. They were in the presence of many other people. Specifically, two princes who—

Uh oh.

In the slow, dread-filled manner of horror theater, she craned her neck just enough to peer backwards...where she discovered the pair standing only a few paces away. Abel was staring at her in open-mouthed astonishment. Sion had a hand to his mouth, but it hardly concealed his amusement.

Hnnnnnngh! Th-This is utterly humiliating! Why must I be subjected to public humiliation like this...

As much as she wished to flee the premises, however, she couldn't do so quite yet. She had to know what in the moons was going on with...that *thing*.

"More importantly, father, what is *this* supposed to be?" she asked in a trembling voice as she gazed up at the enormous white statue of herself.

"Ah, this? I had it made as a gift for your return. I was hoping it'd cheer you up when you saw it. They call it a snow sculpture," he answered as he regarded it with pride. "I heard about what you're doing out there, you know? Viscount Berman came by the other day, and we talked a little. He told me all about the big wooden statue of yourself that you're putting up in the Mia Academy."

"What wooden statue?!" she scoffed. "How come I haven't heard of this?!"

She recalled how Berman had previously wanted to build a massive golden statue. She thought she'd talked him out of it, but clearly, she'd been mistaken.

“After hearing that, I decided I wanted one for the capital as well. Then —and the timing was perfect, by the way—I just so happened to catch wind of statues made of snow, so I looked into it.”

When it came time for serious business, the emperor could be incredibly quick to action. Mia just wished he’d apply that kind of initiative to things that didn’t involve, say, making big snow sculptures of herself.

“B-But...it hasn’t snowed here in the capital yet, has it?”

The most baffling thing about the sculpture was that the whole way here, she didn’t remember seeing a single snowflake. The weather was certainly cold enough for fallen snow to accumulate, but the snow *hadn’t* fallen. So where did her frosty supersized replica come from?

Matthias chuckled with self-satisfaction.

“That’s where Outcount Gilden comes in. It’s already snowing up north right now, and I heard you’re on good terms with the man, so I asked him to haul some over. He was very eager to help out.”

Mia did a quick mental review of the name. Gilden...was the outland noble she befriended on the way back from Ganudos Port Country.

First Berman, now Gilden... Ugh! Why can’t they just mind their own business? Unforgivable!

Trying very hard not to show her intense teeth-gnashing, she glared up at the snow sculpture. Her intense scrutiny inadvertently introduced her to its artistic merits. The snowy Mia was dressed like a fairy, and the level of expression through the normally-fluffy medium was, frankly, breathtaking. From the shape of her cheek to the angle of her jawline, even down to each and every individual strand of hair, there was an incredible detail to attention on par with the finest works of art.

To think you could make something like this out of snow... Art is amazing...

Her mind engaged in escapism, focusing its thoughts on the art rather than the context. It was an understandable reaction, especially when the sculpture had subtly embellished her appearance. Basically, it made her look prettier than she actually was. If flesh-and-scone Mia just barely passed for pretty, then her wintry counterpart cleared the line with ease. There was some level of artistic license being taken for sure. The sculpture was also bigger than her. Much much bigger. Snow Mia was the same height as the palace itself and asserted its looming presence onto every

nearby eye as though it craved every bit of attention it could get. It was so damn tall, in fact, that she wondered if everyone in the capital could see it, so long as they knew which way to look.

Alas, she couldn't stop the context from slipping into her thoughts.

Imagine, please, a beautiful artist's rendition of a girl, so beautiful that any sane mind would wonder if maybe a tad too many liberties had been taken. Now imagine this likeness in the form of a towering sculpture as tall as a palace. Finally, imagine the poor girl whose conspicuously-embellished likeness was now on display for all to see, standing there, staring at said likeness...while her own father barked orders at his artisans to touch up her nose and dimple her cheek. How would this girl feel?

Embarrassed to death, that's how! For a girl in her most sensitive years, this was the stuff of profound cringe. Back-bending, tummy-fluttering, hiss-inducing cringe.

I-I'll die if Abel catches a glimpse of this!

Whoever saw this sculpture would surely believe the Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, to be a bit of an exhibitionist. They'd wince with secondhand embarrassment. Then, after witnessing her snowy beauty, they'd see her in the flesh...and doubtlessly flash knowing smiles at each other afterward.

"Ah, so this is what Princess Mia looks like," they'd say. "Mmm. Well, I mean, art is art, but maybe they brushed her up a little too much?"

I can't let the two of them see this. No way! Absolutely not!

She promptly swiveled on her heels, hands ready to be employed as makeshift blindfolds for the two princes. Sadly, she was too late. Both of them, she realized, had their heads tilted back, their astonished gazes focused squarely on her sculpture.

It was then that Mia wished for the stars to fall from the sky and end the world. Her apocalyptic escapism demonstrates an important fact about the fundamental nature of the world: just as curiosity kills cats, embarrassment kills princesses. If you or anyone you know is a princess, please treat them with dignity and respect.

In any case, having realized that every moment she spent looking at the sculpture was chipping away at her sanity, she promptly changed the topic.

"Mmm, anyway, father—"

"I've waited so long for you to come back. Personally, I think I deserve

at least one ‘dad.’ What do you think?”

“I think I’m trying to have a serious conversation, *father*. These,” she said, turning slightly to gesture at the two princes behind her, “are my classmates, Prince Abel and Prince Sion. They came all the way here to attend my birthday festival.”

Then, she smiled pointedly at Matthias, who grunted.

“Ah. To attend my daughter’s birthday festival. I see,” he repeated, expression sobering. In a decidedly taciturn manner, he walked up to the princes. “Many thanks for making the long journey here. I am Matthias Luna Tearmoon.”

The emperor’s gaze swept across them with all the sharpness of a royal blade, then settled on Abel, who couldn’t help but stumble backward. Catching himself, he managed to convert his backward step into a respectful bow.

So this is Mia’s father, the Emperor of Tearmoon.

Abel quietly sucked in a breath. The man had a commanding presence, equal parts majestic and imposing. It was a different aura from his own father, who was a warrior, but it was no less impressive. There was something about the emperor’s careful, appraising gaze that caused every fiber of muscle in Abel’s body to tense up, pulling his shoulders back and straightening his spine. His eyes began to shift reflexively toward Sion. He forced them back with a rush of shame.

Get a hold of yourself, man!

Etiquette followed reality, and based on the power hierarchy in the continent, it was understood that Sion should be first to return the greeting. The Kingdom of Remno did, after all, sit on a considerably lower rung. Any mention of the Tearmoon Empire could only be paralleled by the Kingdom of Sunkland. Nowhere in that context did Remno fit. On top of that, Abel was a second prince. Compared to Sion, who was the crown prince of Sunkland and heir to the throne, he was inferior in every shape and form.

But what about it? So what if I am?

Mia had said she believed in him, so Abel had to live up to those hopes of hers. It was as simple as that. This was no time for cold feet.

“I am Abel Remno, second prince of the Kingdom of Remno. At school, I partake in the duties and activities of the student council alongside Her Highness Princess Mia. It is an honor to meet you, Your Majesty.”

After concluding his introduction, he boldly met Matthias's gaze. A breath later, Sion spoke as well.

"I am equally honored to make Your Majesty's acquaintance. I am Sion Sol Sunkland, crown prince of the Kingdom of Sunkland. Like my friend, I am also a member of Saint-Noel Academy's student council."

Once the two princes finished introducing themselves, Matthias quietly crossed his arms.

Hm... Abel Remno. So this is the second prince of Remno, he thought as he carefully took the boy's measure. *A sharp gaze. Bold yet balanced stance. A knight in the making, I'd say. I heard the Kingdom of Remno is beefing up their military. The first prince is apparently a better swordsman, but this one... This one is no slouch either, it seems. That is not the face of a coward.*

Next, he looked at Sion.

And this is the crown prince of Sunkland, Sion Sol Sunkland... Handsome. Relaxed, but not vulnerable. He gives the impression of an affable young fellow. I see now that the attention and interest he commands from nobles his age is well deserved.

One by one, he matched his visual assessments to the details in his head. Matthias had, in fact, committed to memory the sons of every royal family and powerful noble in the region. Why? To find a good husband for Mia, of course!

Rumors are that Remno's first prince has a violent temperament. As far as I can tell though, this Abel boy shows no such disposition. But Mia is a gentle girl. She will surely be more attracted to those with a gentle nature, like me. She used to tell me she would marry me one day, after all.

Concluding his evaluation with a nasal huff, he turned to Sion.

Which means...the one she's actually after must be Prince Sion. But wait! Would she really fall for a boy who's so clearly the object of countless women's affections? Is she really that shallow? Of course not. She used to tell me she would marry me one day, after all. There's no doubt that she'd prefer someone who's more the steady, faithful sort.

He nodded to himself as he mused.

Even if one of these two were to establish a romantic relationship with Mia, I'll need to make them spend another five...maybe ten more years on the whetstone of manliness before they become worthy of her. It's impossible to truly be a match for her*, of course, but they'll have to at least be near her level...*

He mused about some very vacuous things, but he mused nonetheless.

"Oh, father," said Mia, interrupting his worthless contemplation, "about this year's birthday festival. I have a really good idea."

“Do you, Mia? What kind of good idea?” he said, his expression instantly reverting to its prior softness.

Mia smiled with no small amount of smugness and said, “As a matter of fact...for my birthday this year, I want everyone to celebrate it with me.”

So proud was she of this idea that she even puffed out her chest a little.

“Hm? Of course everyone will celebrate it with you. That goes without saying, I believe.”

Matthias frowned in confusion as Mia swayed a finger left and right.

“Not just the nobles. *Everyone*. Every man, woman, and child who lives in the empire. I want them all to celebrate my birthday, enjoy the festival, and have a wonderful time.”

“That...still goes without saying, doesn’t it? I can’t imagine anyone refusing to celebrate your birthday. That would be insolence of the highest order. I even issued a decree stating all such offenders were to be put to dea __”

“No, father. A decree is just forcing them to obey. That’s not what I want.” Mia gently shook her head.

“Oh? What is it that you want then?”

“It’s very simple. I want everyone...to eat delicious food together. That will be enough,” she answered with a bright smile. “What I’m looking for is a well-fed empire during my birthday. Every imperial subject down to the poorest peasant should be able to eat to their heart’s content. Not a single soul should be allowed to go hungry. I want everyone to eat, drink, and enjoy themselves.”

Matthias listened with widening eyes as she continued.

“In fact, it’s something that’s been bothering me every year. All the nobles prepare so much food for me, but it’s too much. I can’t possibly eat it all by myself! The guests can’t finish it all either, so there’s always lots of food left over. That doesn’t make me happy one bit. I’d much rather see more smiles on the faces of our people. *That’s* what would make me happy.”

The emperor’s eyes grew teary as he listened with increasing fascination.

“Knowing that people are throwing food away for me brings me no joy. I’d much rather give that food to everyone and have them eat it with big smiles on their faces. That’s a far more fitting thing to do for a festival.”

“Oooh, Mia, what kindness! My dear darling daughter is such an angel... Well said! You’ve made your wishes clear! I’ll have messengers sent to all the nobles immediately. They will be told to open their doors and invite their people to a feast in their homes. Every town in every domain shall have a feast prepared in its square. There shall be ample food, and all shall be welcome. Not a soul is to go hungry during the festival.”

Mia mentally roared in triumph at her father’s commandment.

Oho ho, there we go. Done! It’s such a simple idea—I can’t believe it took me so long to come up with it... Why throw away the food when I can just have the people stock up *on their eating? That way, even if there’s a supply shortage down the road, they won’t get too upset!*

...So, eating isn’t the kind of thing you can *stock up on*, which means this whole idea basically face-planted right out the gate, but fortunately for her—and unfortunately for everyone else—no mind readers were present to point out this glaring error in her logic.

Well then...

Ludwig felt the hint of a tear as he observed the exchange between Mia and her father. The wastage perpetuated by nobles had been troubling him as well. Every birthday festival led to large amounts of food being thrown away. As Mia had predicted, next year’s harvest was showing clear signs of decline. If a famine truly was on the horizon, the squandering of food would be absolutely inexcusable.

Yet how would one go about reversing this culture of waste? Ludwig hadn’t the foggiest idea. Preparations for the upcoming banquets were already underway. At this point, demanding a more frugal menu would only lead to half-prepped ingredients being left to rot. Food waste seemed unpreventable. Moreover, with Mia’s birthday being the purpose of the celebration, the emperor himself was running the show. So long as he stood behind the lavish custom, not even Mia could oppose it. There was also the fact that such extravagance led to a lot of money being moved, which was a phenomenon whose value could not be understated. There was significant economic benefit to having merchants from far and wide gather at the festival.

That was why Ludwig had decided to shrug his shoulders at the event. For all its ills, it had its boons. More importantly, there didn’t seem to be

anything he could do about it. It was by now a yearly custom, and forced change would only result in needless chaos. Figuring it'd be better to maintain the status quo than to inadvertently magnify the problem, he'd settled for resigned acceptance.

Mia, meanwhile, clearly begged to differ...and did so by presenting a solution of brilliant simplicity.

If we're going to throw away the food anyway, why not feed it to the masses instead... Genius!

What the nobles wanted was a chance to flaunt their wealth through lavish spending. Mia understood this perfectly. Then, rather than oppose their wishes, she drew upon it, providing them with the outlet they desired. Her genius lay in the outlet's *orientation*, which she tweaked ever so slightly, redirecting the nobles' energy in a more beneficial direction. It was an impressive maneuver that drew from Ludwig a long sigh of admiration.

The more I think about it, the more sense it makes. Even if we told nobles to tighten up their budget, they'd probably just keep all the extra food to themselves.

There was no guarantee that reprimanding nobles for wastage put more food on people's tables. In that case, they might as well let the nobles go nuts, then take all that extra food and distribute it to the masses.

By personally declaring that she wished for all imperial subjects to eat to their heart's content, nobles would try to please her by offering generous amounts of food, while the people would enjoy filling meals of luxurious quality.

Arguably, this represents a compromise. Not the best solution, but the second best. The ideal approach is obviously to save that food for the famine...but seeing that it's unworkable, she didn't waste a second putting the next best thing into motion. As always, her fountain of wisdom is never-ending.

And as always, Ludwig was impressed with Mia. The sun rises in the east, the sky is blue, et cetera, et cetera...

Thus began the birthday festival that would be known to future generations as "Princess Mia's Festival of Debauchery." Originally proposed by the titular Mia as a casual "why throw it away when we can just have everyone eat it together?" kind of thing, the event ended up

having unexpected and lasting effects.

No one managed to “stock up” on eating like Mia had hoped, of course. That went without saying, seeing as it defied the laws of nature. Memories of the festival, however, lingered. Memories of great food and even greater cheer. For the general populace, nobles were little more than extorters of tax. Few had ever received anything of visible benefit from the nobility. This event changed that.

At the behest of Princess Mia, every single imperial subject was invited to partake in a feast where food and drink were served for free. The purpose of the event was to celebrate Mia’s birthday, and those in attendance were given only one instruction—they were to enjoy the day to the best of their ability. Said instruction was, in fact, imperial decree, leaving all attendees with nervous smiles as they roamed about trying to act festive amidst an atmosphere of equal parts curious excitement and stomach-turning unease. Those on bad terms with each other withheld their bile, figuring their heads more valuable than a well-timed jeer. Forced or not, the festival resulted in laughs all around as they celebrated the occasion.

At some point, perhaps affected by strong drinks, a man began to sing. The lively tempo of his tune compelled the nearby youth to dance. A merchant, passions stirred by the atmosphere, donated a barrel of wine to the cause. Another merchant, realizing the promotional value of what had just occurred, joined the fray, serving snacks and sides. Soon, men, women, and children alike were taking spare food from their homes and offering it unprompted to strangers.

Amidst all the activity, a carriage would sometimes pass by carrying the protagonist of the day, Mia herself, often doubling the local excitement. The ill wills of bygone days began to give way under the weight of false smiles—a weight that would eventually flatten even their own falsity, leaving only the genuine mirth they conveyed.

It was...an odd occasion. One that defied description. A brief but wonderful miracle of a festival that had never graced the empire before. People remembered it as, above all, a time of good fun and high spirits. Whether townsfolk or merchants, rich or poor, friends and enemies, old and young, men and women, and boys and girls of all shape and color gathered under one communal purpose—to celebrate the birthday of a girl. And at

the end of it all, the joyful memory of that day embedded itself deep in their hearts, never to fade.

It was a memory that glowed like a beacon of hope in times of darkness, giving suffering souls the strength to carry on...for they now knew that Princess Mia was a noble, but not just any noble. Unlike the rest, she *saw* them. Somewhere up in the nebulous peaks of aristocracy, there was a girl who paid no mind to the gulf between their status and invited them—all of them—to dine at her feast. So, they endured, because she was a generous girl with a kind heart. Because while their lives might have reverted to their usual misery, if they persevered, that wonderful time might return once more. So onward they walked bearing the burdens of life...in the hopes of enjoying another taste of the brief yet beautiful miracle that Princess Mia would prepare for them.

Disaster would befall the empire time and again afterward, but on each and every occasion, its people did not lose heart. Shaken but not crushed, they would endure so that at the year's closing, they could once again enjoy that festival of cheer.

The festival would go on to become a lasting tradition of the empire, but that, unfortunately, is a story that must be saved for another time.

Chapter 3: Donning the Most Sublime of Colors, Mia Prepares to Step Forth onto the Road to Empress!

On the first day of the Mia Birthday Festival, the Whitemoon Palace hosted a magnificent ball. Nobles flooded into Lunatear to participate, filling the palace halls. At its entrance before the gate, they were treated to the stunning sight of the massive Mia snow sculpture.

“Wow, so this is what we’ve been hearing so much about...”

So tall it seemed to grow in size as they swept their gazes up toward its crest, it was a breathtaking work of art that eschewed compromise. Despite its size, it was intricately detailed. The quality of handiwork alone was enough to garner attention, but what impressed the nobles the most was actually something else.

“To make something like this...out of *snow*. His Majesty is truly incredible.”

The audacious idea of making such a magnificent sculpture out of a material that, once the weather warmed, would simply melt away struck a chord with the nobility. It also momentarily turned them all into art philosophers.

“I see... But of course. Had this been made of gold, its beauty would instead suffer. Gold is trite in comparison. It lacks...*art*,” the musing noble said. “Look upon this work. Its impermanence. Its ephemeral existence. It’s *because* it’s so easily ruined and doomed to fade that it’s so beautiful. To think that so much meticulous work has gone into a piece of such fleeting beauty... Aaah, to lay eyes on it is to taste art in its rawest form, and what an intricate flavor it is!”

To spend money and expect returns was the doings of lowly merchants. Expending wealth on evanescence, on the chattels of transient dreams and moments, was the mark of the truly rich.

“But the subject in question—our dear princess—seems to have spoken some very trite words, hasn’t she?”

“That she has. The rabble is worth no more than the food she proposes to give them. We should be throwing *both* away. What is this strange fascination she has with them?”

Official notice of this birthday festival’s proceedings was received with bewilderment by nobles, adding to a growing list of grievances they had about the ostensibly irrational behavior Mia kept displaying. The poor, in their opinion, should be ignored. They’d already been provided with a refuge in the form of the Newmoon District. Wasn’t the whole point of that project to put them out of sight and out of mind? Why would anyone purposefully dirty their hands by reaching back into that hole? All this donating and hospital-building seemed like a waste of time and money.

“Youthful indiscretion, surely. Her Highness is still young. Besides, it’s convention in the empire for a male heir to succeed the throne. Lord Sapphias of Bluemoon seems to me the most likely to become the next emperor...”

“Now, now, the Redmoons have plenty of sons as well. Their military prowess will surely be a boon to our stability.”

As they argued their respective opinions, the one name that never crossed their minds was Mia’s. None of them doubted for a second that the throne would pass to a boy from one of the four houses that shared the emperor’s blood. Bound by old customs, the mere idea of a bid to crown an empress was simply inconceivable. To them, Princess Mia would eventually be married off to another kingdom, and rightfully so. They only wished she’d ditch her fanciful ideas and learn to behave in a manner befitting her regal blood. So long as she did so by the time of her marriage, all would be well.

Trading such questionably appropriate comments amongst themselves, the nobles stepped into the ballroom.

“Well now...”

Though an annual occurrence, the sheer visual impact of the sight never failed to draw breaths of awe from its guests. In the middle of the room sat an enormous round table, atop of which were numerous dishes of both quality and spectacle befitting the princess’s birthday. The head chef had poured his heart and soul into every item on the menu, resulting in a feast

for not only the tongue but the eyes.

"Indeed, a dinner banquet worthy of Her Highness's name. The lavish presentation each year is truly awe-inspiring."

"Yes, these are practically edible art pieces. Such beauty."

"I just tried one a few moments ago, and goodness, the head chef has outdone himself!"

They shared a chuckle, but none of them had any idea the sheer degree to which the head chef had engaged in said outdoing. This year, at Mia's strong request, the head chef had taken great pains to reduce the kitchen's budget for the banquet. After much effort, he'd successfully managed to produce the menu on display at two-fifths the cost of previous years. He also suffered at least three times the amount of headaches, but anyway.

"I'd like to try some tasty food made from cheap ingredients," Mia had said.

Okay, so the actual request wasn't worded all that strongly. In fact, she might have even mentioned it offhandedly on a whim. However, the head chef took it very seriously and committed himself to seeing it through. The resultant dishes were a series of culinary miracles that kept costs low while satiating the taste buds of nobles, which either bore witness to the latent potential of cheap ingredients...or the profound unreliability of noble taste buds. In any case, while said nobles were lauding the head chef's exquisite creations, the lights around the room suddenly dimmed.

"Oh? What's happening?"

A wave of commotion spread through the guests. The next instant...

"Greetings, everyone. I thank you all for coming to celebrate my birthday."

The heroine of the evening had arrived.

"Goodness... Why, that's..."

There was a collective gasp of wonder as she walked through the ballroom door. Not an eye went undazzled by the faintly radiant form of Mia Luna Tearmoon. Her gently shimmering white-golden hair fluttered like silk with her every move. A pair of soft, full cheeks complemented a slender neck, further accentuated by the prominent contour of her collarbones. All of which glowed. This body-wide luminescence she displayed was, in fact, the work of the same bath herbs that had saved her life on that fateful day not so long ago.

“How mesmerizing. This must be what it means to ‘glow with beauty.’ What an apt metaphor...” murmured one of the onlookers.

Said onlooker was wrong. It wasn’t a metaphor. She was *literally* glowing.

Even more notable was the fact that her current beauty had a hint of maturity—adult allure rather than childlike charm.

“And that dress... What impressive tailoring!”

What surprised the nobles most was the color of her attire. Whereas Mia was normally disposed to wearing brighter colors—as evidenced by the adorable children’s dress she’d worn the previous year—today, Mia came donning a dress dyed in a sublime purple. It was a garment with *impact*, which was duly felt by all those present.

That’s right. This year, Mia was here to make a statement. Not only did her silken hair and smooth skin glow, the clothes she wore gave off an aura of regality. Never in her life had she looked more like a princess!

Jaws hit the floor throughout the ballroom. They were, however, quickly reattached. Their owners' shock was only momentary, after which the room began to buzz with the quiet energy of a roomful of minds all trying to solve a common riddle—what, exactly, was being signified by Mia's wearing of a purple dress?

Purple was the color of emperors. Being the emperor's daughter, it wasn't exactly strange for her to wear it. Indeed, it wasn't the dress itself, but the timing. She'd chosen to wear the sublime color here, on the day of her birthday festival, in front of countless nobles. Surely, the nobles thought, there had to be some meaning behind that, the most obvious of which was a message of some sort. A *statement*.

Was she declaring her intent to succeed the throne?

Many of them thought so. Little did they know, another revelation of even greater impact would soon arise, not only affirming their suspicion...but also sending their jaws crashing to the floor once again.

Now for a peek behind the scenes. The reason Mia's dress ended up being a purple one today was actually related to her recent diet. Purple, you see, is a contractive color! The world has many colors; some are expansive, making an object look larger than they are, and others are contractive, thereby making the object look smaller.

Mia's appetite had rebounded after the incident at the Yellowmoon manor concluded, then just kept growing more and more, resulting in a tad bit of overeating. The color trickery was an idea from Anne meant to counteract this development.

"Milady, this is something I learned from Miss Chloe, but apparently...there are colors that make you look slimmer if you wear them."

Needless to say, Mia was more than thrilled by the news and eagerly gave it a shot.

And that's all. A straightforward explanation for a simple decision that *nobody* in the ballroom came close to figuring out.

"That dress... That *color*... It can't be..." said a noble with an audible gulp.

And it wasn't. It was just a contractive color.

"But it must be... What else could it mean to wear the imperial color on

a day like this? Her Highness...intends to succeed the throne," replied another noble, voice fraught with tension.

Nope, it was just the outcome of overeating.

"So she seeks to upend a long-standing tradition of the empire? Who would have thought she was hiding such profound ambitions...?"

Nobody, because she wasn't. The only thing she was hiding was a tummy bulge with a slimming color.

Further commotion spread throughout the nobles. Before it could subside, Mia hit them with a revelation that was even more shocking.

"And today, I'd like to introduce you all to two people." She gestured for them to join her. "This way, please."

Two boys walked over and stood behind her.

"Who are they?" whispered someone in the crowd.

The sentiment was shared by many, for the boys' faces were not well-known. Those who did recognize them, however, were utterly dumbfounded. And for good reason.

"These are my classmates, Prince Abel and Prince Sion. Prince Abel is the second prince of the Kingdom of Remno, and Prince Sion is the crown prince of the Kingdom of Sunkland."

Her introduction was met with speechless, pin-drop silence.

"They've come all this way to attend my birthday festival," she said, presenting the matter as if it were utterly mundane.

It was of course anything but, and it hit the nobles in the room like a thunderclap in their minds. Tearmoon was certainly a powerful empire, and the birthday festival of its princess was bound to attract a host of guests from neighboring nations. It wasn't rare to see Perujin or Ganudos royalty present at such events. But *Sunkland*? They'd never received royalty from a kingdom of Sunkland's caliber. And this wasn't just any royalty—no, this was Prince Sion, first in line for the throne. His attendance was representative of his kingdom's stance. In other words, the mighty Sunkland regarded Princess Mia highly enough to warrant Sion's presence at her birthday.

"The Sunkland prince is here... Incredible..."

"Don't forget about the other prince, now. He's no afterthought."

The Kingdom of Remno, while not on the same level as Tearmoon or Sunkland, was not a minor entity. Nations underestimated its power at their

own peril. Being the kingdom's second prince, Abel's position paled in comparison to Sion...but conversely, it made him an extremely viable candidate to marry *into* imperial lineage. What could Mia be implying by donning imperial colors and introducing these two princes? As the nobles tried to parse her intent, the answers they arrived at left them shaken to the core.

But somehow, the day still hadn't reached its climax. An even *greater* shock was yet in store.

The stunned silence in the ballroom magnified the sound of its door opening. Countless pairs of flustered eyes shot toward the source of the noise.

"I apologize for my tardiness, Miss Mia."

Esmeralda Greenmoon, daughter of one of the empire's Four Dukes, appeared in the opening, eliciting...a collective shrug of indifference, since it was common knowledge that she was a good friend of Mia. Well, it *would* have elicited a shrug if the audience wasn't too busy picking their jaws up the floor for a third time after seeing the girl standing *behind* Esmeralda.

Her smile evoked images of purity—fresh white snow, perhaps, or clear spring water. She looked only slightly older than Mia, putting her in her mid-teens. Her pristine aqua hair fluttered in a mild breeze, allowing glimpses of her radiant, milky skin underneath. There was an air of divine beauty to her as she walked in.

Not a soul in the room hadn't seen her before, if not directly, then through her portraits. It was the continent's leading saint, the Holy Lady herself.

"Greetings, Mia," she said with a giggle. "And happy birthday."

The arrival of Rafina Orca Belluga, daughter of the Holy Principality of Belluga's ruler and Duke, altered the room's atmosphere once again. The two princes were heavyweights in their own right, but Rafina stood in a class of her own. Making an enemy of her was the same as making enemies of a host of nations across the continent, Sunkland included. That was how much sway she held in the eyes of these nobles. And somehow, this political titan had decided to come all the way to Tearmoon to wish Mia a happy birthday.

The sheer speed and intensity with which new developments arose was too much for the bewildered guests to keep up with, and all they could do

was watch, stupefied, as Rafina approached Mia with breezy steps.

"M-Miss Rafina? Why are you here?" asked Mia.

"Gosh, what an odd question. Why wouldn't I be here? It's my friend's birthday. Isn't it natural to show up and say a few words?"

Thoroughly amused by Mia's wide-eyed bewilderment, Rafina let out a playful giggle and added, "I'm so glad it worked. That expression alone was worth coming in secret."

"My... I'm glad you're enjoying yourself, then. This was a long way to come for a simple prank..." said Mia with the kind of nervous deference one displayed when favored by someone far more important.

Every noble in the room inwardly rolled their eyes at what they deemed to be very transparent theatrics. As if, they thought, it was possible for Mia to have been unaware of Rafina's intention to attend. For all its ingenuousness, however, they couldn't deny that it had sent a powerful message. The sight of Mia and Rafina gleefully chirping as they took each other's hands made clear the dizzying amount of power and influence held by the current emperor's daughter.

It was well known that Mia enjoyed the deep affection of her father. Lately, her philanthropic efforts had also earned her a great deal of popularity among the populace. The appropriateness of this behavior notwithstanding, it nevertheless factored into her influence. Furthermore, rumors of her benevolent attitude toward outland nobles—a group that naturally distanced themselves from the central nobility—were putting her on very good terms with them. These were all things that the nobles in the room had more or less been aware of.

What they hadn't known, however, was the degree to which she'd expanded her influence abroad. From the prince of Sunkland—a kingdom often considered Tearmoon's equal—to the prince of Remno—a smaller but powerful kingdom that commanded respect—she had some *important* friends. But even this pair of handsome royalty was outranked by the girl with whom they were currently trading polite smiles—Rafina Orca Belluga. Mia had not only ingratiated herself with the princes of two mighty kingdoms, she'd made herself a close friend of the Holy Lady, whose authority across the continent was unrivaled.

Had there ever been someone like Mia in the history of the empire? Certainly not! The overwhelming amount of political clout she just

displayed in the span of a few minutes was more than enough to silence her critics. Soon, most of the room had come to the staggering realization that they were in the presence of an absolute goliath. They already understood that under *no* circumstances should they ever cross Mia. The emperor's affection alone made it unwise. But now, with her tremendously powerful circle of friends, it would be suicide. A good number of foreheads began to glisten with sweat.

Then, they recalled the emperor's imperial decree, which had supposedly expressed the wishes of the princess. She'd called for every man, woman, and child in the empire to celebrate her birthday by enjoying themselves to their heart's content. Then, didn't that mean...they'd better make sure that actually happened?

Motivated by this new, nerve-wracking realization, the terrified nobles returned to their domains and promptly opened their doors to their people, greeting their common guests with strained smiles and forced laughter. But they couldn't afford not to do so; they were desperate. Failing to please their people would be courting Princess Mia's displeasure. If she were to take issue with any one of them... Most nobles stopped thinking there and just started shaking their guests' hands; the consequences were too dreadful to imagine.

As a result, the nobles ended up sharing meal and mead with their people. As they sang the traditional song of birthdays, voices joined in unison to celebrate their princess, they...started enjoying themselves too.

"What a generous lord we have."

Someone among the guests uttered the phrase. It reached their lord's ears, and he found it...not altogether unpleasant. In fact, he quite fancied the praise. Besides, he figured, it would only be for five days. He just had to put on a good face for his people for a mere five days, and he'd be in the clear. In the meantime, he might as well savor whatever enjoyment he could extract. That was, after all, what the decree demanded, and it applied to him too.

Memories of the festival were thus etched into his mind as well. Fun times with his people, many of whom had until then been nothing but names on a tax list but were now faces he'd seen across a cup of strong drink.

They were lasting memories, ones that would have no small effect on

him, as well as the countless other nobles who shared a similar experience.

Meanwhile, there were also those who opposed the trend and stubbornly conformed to old customs.

"What an upsetting turn of events... This is simply not the way. We'd better have a word with Lord Sapphias and see if we can push him to action."

"No, no. Her lineup is formidable. The average man stands no chance. We must convince the House of Redmoon to move against her. She *must* be contained."

Unbeknownst to these nefarious conspirators, however, was the current diplomatic situation surrounding the younger generation of the Four Dukes. Even in the houses they sought to persuade, seeds of influence—ones that had dropped out of Mia's pocket while she'd been mindlessly strolling around in the area—had sprouted into vibrant saplings whose roots pushed ever deeper into the soil of friendship.

They also had no idea that their secret plotting would soon be relayed directly to Mia's ears.

Thus, Mia took her first proud step on the road to becoming empress! A road that was apparent to basically everyone but her...

After seeing Mia off to the evening's banquet hall, Ludwig took a moment to gather himself. Even now, he could feel the emotion in his chest threatening to moisten his eyes.

"All this time... But I never expected...she'd wear the color on her own..."

Just pondering the implications gave him chills. Chills of uncontrollable excitement.

"At last... *At long last*, Her Highness has made it known, publicly and unequivocally, that she intends to rule Tearmoon as empress..."

It was his deepest, most profound wish. Ever since that fateful day when Mia first spoke to him, he hadn't allowed himself a moment's rest, running constantly from place to place throughout the empire. Though her initial desire had been to solve the empire's financial difficulties, her ambitions hadn't stopped there. She wanted to fix *everything*. Her goal was to fundamentally revitalize the empire. So Ludwig did everything he could to

assist her. Over time, as he faithfully devoted himself to her cause, a thought began to tickle his mind with increasing frequency.

"Isn't Her Highness the most qualified person to lead this empire?"

It was a conclusion he'd arrived at not through passion but logic. The empire needed guidance, and objectively speaking, no one seemed more suited to provide it than Mia. Even so...

"Tearmoon's first empress, huh..."

Just saying the words aloud made his heart shudder. In a moment of clarity, he realized that while he'd intended to apply only pure, cold logic to the question, he simply couldn't dissociate himself from his emotions. Mia might very well be the best person to lead the empire, but his belief in this notion was not entirely rational.

In picturing a future in which Mia sat on the throne as its first-ever empress, he always envisioned himself at her side—no, not even at her side, for the simple act of assisting her, no matter his distance, was more than enough to lift his soul. To act as her arms and legs, working toward her goals...was, for some reason, a profoundly fulfilling thought. He didn't know why, though he did sense a vague tingling in the back of his mind. It felt like a faint memory of a past long forgotten, as if he'd once yearned for this with all his heart and soul. He let the feeling fade into oblivion, figuring it was the remnant of an old dream.

"A dream, perhaps...but one worth having, however fleeting it might have been. After all, what could be more fulfilling than seeing her become empress, than working by her side...?"

He grimaced, realizing that he was indulging a bout of sentimentality.

"Enough daydreaming. Nothing has been accomplished yet, and so much remains to be done."

With a few firm slaps to his cheeks, he let out a sigh and began to walk.

"I need to contact Balthazar and Master Galv. Gil too. Then round up the rest of the crew. We're going to need all the help we can get."

His steps were steady and purposeful, for he had a clear goal—to rally around Mia the strength of the band of young officials who all learned under the old wise man.

All was for the sublime goal...of dressing Mia in the imperial hue of purple.

After sending Mia off in her purple dress, Anne nodded to herself with extreme satisfaction, proud that the fruits of her research had come in handy for Mia.

She's been working so hard lately. It's understandable for her to be putting on a little weight.

The amount of pressure Mia must have been under was beyond her ability to fathom. All she knew was that Mia coped with it by eating sweets, which led to a slight filling-out of her contour. Determined to make herself useful to her mistress during this busy time, Anne had made sure to leave some time in her everyday schedule for research. The bath Mia had taken before the party was, in fact, Anne's work. She'd prepared it using herbs from Chloe, which were supposed to relieve fatigue. By the time Mia had gotten out, she was glowing with energy. She was also glowing, literally.

Anne was relentless in her pursuit for new information. She actively solicited advice from attendants who served students from other kingdoms. Furthermore, she took advantage of the fact that Saint-Noel, as the continent's leading academic city, attracted a wide variety of vendors. Whenever she had time, she'd head out to town and browse its many stores in search of something that would benefit Mia. On top of all this, she continued to hone her own skills, experimenting with cosmetic routines and combing techniques to bring out the best in Mia's skin and hair. And she did all of this without letting up on her studies, during which she focused on ways to maintain Mia's health.

"I need to do everything I can for milady."

Though she never said it out loud, she considered herself the person most responsible for maintaining Mia's beauty, and it was a burden she bore with pride.

Today, Mia's appearance had cleared even the high bar Anne had set for herself. Her beauty was absolutely radiant. Again, in a literal sense as well as metaphorical.

"For now though, I think that's good enough." She smiled to herself. "I managed to give her hair a good combing too, unlike last time. I felt so awful when... Hm? Wait... Last time? When was that again?"

She frowned. A faint inkling of *something* flitted about in her mind, too quick to catch but too conspicuous to ignore. She'd combed Mia's hair at some point. Well, she'd done so many times, but this time in particular...had

been an important moment for Mia. Maybe the most important, and Anne hadn't been able to do it well. She just couldn't remember when it was, or what the circumstances were.

"Maybe it's from a dream I had in the past..."

Despite her efforts at recollection, no distinct memory emerged. Nevertheless, she heeded it as a cautionary tale, vague though it might be. The thought of being unable to comb Mia's hair well during a momentous occasion in her life was devastating. Mia would surely marry at some point in the future, and she'd appear before vast numbers of her subjects during her ceremony. When the time came, it would be Anne's first and foremost duty to make sure she looked her absolute best. Nothing but the best would suffice, and Anne had every intention of providing it when the time came. That was why she spent each and every spare moment in her life trying to improve.

"Let me see... What can I get done before milady comes back?" She crossed her arms in thought. "She looks so lovely today. I bet she'll have a wonderful time with the two princes. Which means...she'll probably be out for a while. And I bet she'll be pretty tired when she gets back."

Knowing Mia's skill on the dance floor, she'd probably spend a good deal of time twirling about. A pre-bed soak, then, was undoubtedly in order. Anne gathered the necessary toiletries and headed off to the bath chamber, figuring her mistress would surely appreciate a warm herb-infused bath upon returning.

All was for the sublime goal...of dressing Mia in the contractive hue of purple.

Back at the banquet, Mia was having the time of her life thanks to Anne's photogenic trickery. She shook a marquis's hand, then greeted his daughter, who introduced a friend. The friend marveled at Mia's dress before adding, "Oh, Your Highness, you simply *must* try these. They're delicious!"

Never one to turn down a gastronomic recommendation, Mia promptly complied.

Munch, munch, munch!

After that conversation wrapped up, she then exchanged greetings with a count before skipping over to a nearby Rania, the younger princess of

Perujin Agricultural Country for a chat.

"Oh, Your Highness, I've been meaning to ask you to try this. It's a new cake we developed in Perujin."

Munch, munch, munch!

While she was eating, one of the central nobility approached to say hello.

Ugh, this man has the worst *timing.*

She favored him with an extra polite smile to hide her annoyance.

Upon devouring a whole two slices of the cake, she discovered some sautéed mushrooms that looked tantalizing.

Munch, munch, munch!

After she finished giving her jaws a thorough workout, a figure walked over to her.

"Excuse me, Princess Mia, but would you care to join me on the floor for a number or two?" asked a courtly Sion.

Music had begun to fill the room, and guests, having exhausted their appetite for talk, had begun to amuse themselves on the dance floor.

"My, Sion... Asking me to dance already?"

"I certainly am. Abel beat me to the punch when we were greeting your father, and I'm not quite nice enough to let him have the first shot at everything."

She quickly glanced around and found Abel half the room away. He shrugged at her helplessly.

"Huh... You boys sure don't have it easy, do y— Eek!"

She let out a short shriek when Sion pulled her along by the hand.

"M-My, someone's a little pushy today, isn't he?" she said, flustered.

As a rule, Mia was terrible on defense. Meanwhile, her opponent, with his good looks and charming manner, was one of the strongest attackers in history. What paltry excuse for poise she managed to mount immediately melted before his assault.

"Ha ha, you're the star of this show, after all. I can't exactly keep you to myself the whole night, so I'm making the most of what time I have."

He promptly shifted into motion, brisk steps moving in time with the tune. Mia, despite still being flustered, had no trouble keeping up.

Do remember that for all her inadequacies, Mia was an unequivocally brilliant dancer. Recently, she'd also added "a decent rider" and "a

dangerous cook" to her resume. Her list of skills was becoming quite impressive, at least in length. Given enough time and opportunity, even Mia could improve!

"My, Sion. Is it just me, or are your steps even sharper than before?"

"Are they? Or is it yours that have grown a bit dull?" he replied with a playful wink.

This mild provocation allowed Mia to retrieve some of her composure. She gave him a bold smile back.

"Well, excuse me for worrying about showing you up in front of so many people. Shall I stop holding back?"

Though she sparred with him through words, they masked no hostility. Tonight, Mia felt no antagonism toward Sion. All she cared about was enjoying their dance. By now, the bitterness she'd once harbored had eroded down to nothing. Liberated from its bonds, she stepped freely, treating Sion as partner instead of foe, and the pair of them wowed the guests with a stunning display of rhythmic unity.

The time they spent on the floor in each other's company was a wonderful time for Mia. She thoroughly enjoyed it...and so did Sion. Perhaps that was why...when he ceded her hand to Abel, his chest tightened ever so slightly.

"Phew..."

As Sion returned from the dance floor, a slew of girls swarmed over to him. Many were dazzled by his dancing, but many more by his title. For a young woman from a noble house, few men could be more appealing than the crown prince of Sunkland. A word of affection from him was equivalent to a promise of power that rivaled Mia's.

Normally, he'd parry their advances with a wink and a smile. Tonight, though, he found his patience lacking. For some reason, the thought of asking Keithwood to step in and swat them away was immensely tempting. Sadly, only aristocrats were present; their attendants had not been invited to the ball. He was on his own.

All right, then... How do I get myself out of here?

Suddenly, he found himself growing tremendously weary of their faces, each of which hid their selfish calculation so poorly they might as well have written it across their forehead. He grimaced in disgust, then grimaced at

the fact he had grimaced. Just then...

“Excuse me, uh...”

A figure waded through the drove of girls, unfazed by the ensuing barrage of complaints. He recognized the face.

“Oh? You’re...Tiona, right?”

Tiona Rudolvon, daughter of an outcount, had also been invited to Mia’s banquet.

“Well pardon *you*, you country bumpkin! What makes you think you can just butt in?” screeched a nearby girl.

Tiona paid her no mind. Without the slightest hesitation, she took Sion’s hand.

“Could you come with me, Prince Sion? Miss Rafina would like to speak to you.”

Without even waiting for a reply, she pulled him straight through the middle of the ballroom and out the door.

“Ahem. Miss Tiona, might I point out that if Miss Rafina wishes to speak to me, then leaving the room seems rather counterproductive?” said Sion with friendly sarcasm as he looked back through the doorway at the sight of Rafina standing in the middle of the room conversing with a throng of Tearmoon nobles.

Tiona gasped, realizing her blunder, but Sion reassured her with a smile.

“But...the atmosphere in the ballroom is admittedly a tad fatiguing, and I do find myself eager to get some fresh air.”

He hastened his pace, now pulling her along behind him. They made their way to a balcony. His exposed skin, still hot from exertion, welcomed the refreshing chill of cold wind. The area was deserted. Few, if any, had the audacity to sneak out of the princess’s birthday banquet. He drew a deep breath, letting winter soothe his lungs before blowing it back out. Then, he turned and said, “I must apologize, Tiona. You got me out of a tight situation there, but surely, walking off with me like that didn’t leave a good impression on your peers.”

Tiona softly laughed.

“It’s fine. I’ve got nothing to lose. Can’t get any worse than rock bottom, after all.”

She spoke with a surprising amount of dignity, considering the nature of her words. There was no humility, no excessive self-deprecation. Only a

calm statement of fact.

“But even that’s starting to get a lot better thanks to Her Highness,” she continued. “Lately, I haven’t been bullied in Saint-Noel at all, and ever since the election, lots of people have come to me to reconcile their past actions.”

She pressed her hands to her chest and closed her eyes, as though recalling a most precious memory.

“I...see. That’s good to hear.” Sion regarded her reminiscing visage and found himself growing pensive as well.

So... We’re the same, then. We both have Mia to thank for our salvation.

“More importantly, um... Prince Sion, I know I might be overstepping by asking this, but...” Tiona paused to gather herself. Then, with resolve renewed, she said, “Are you sure you’re okay with that?”

“Huh? Okay with what?”

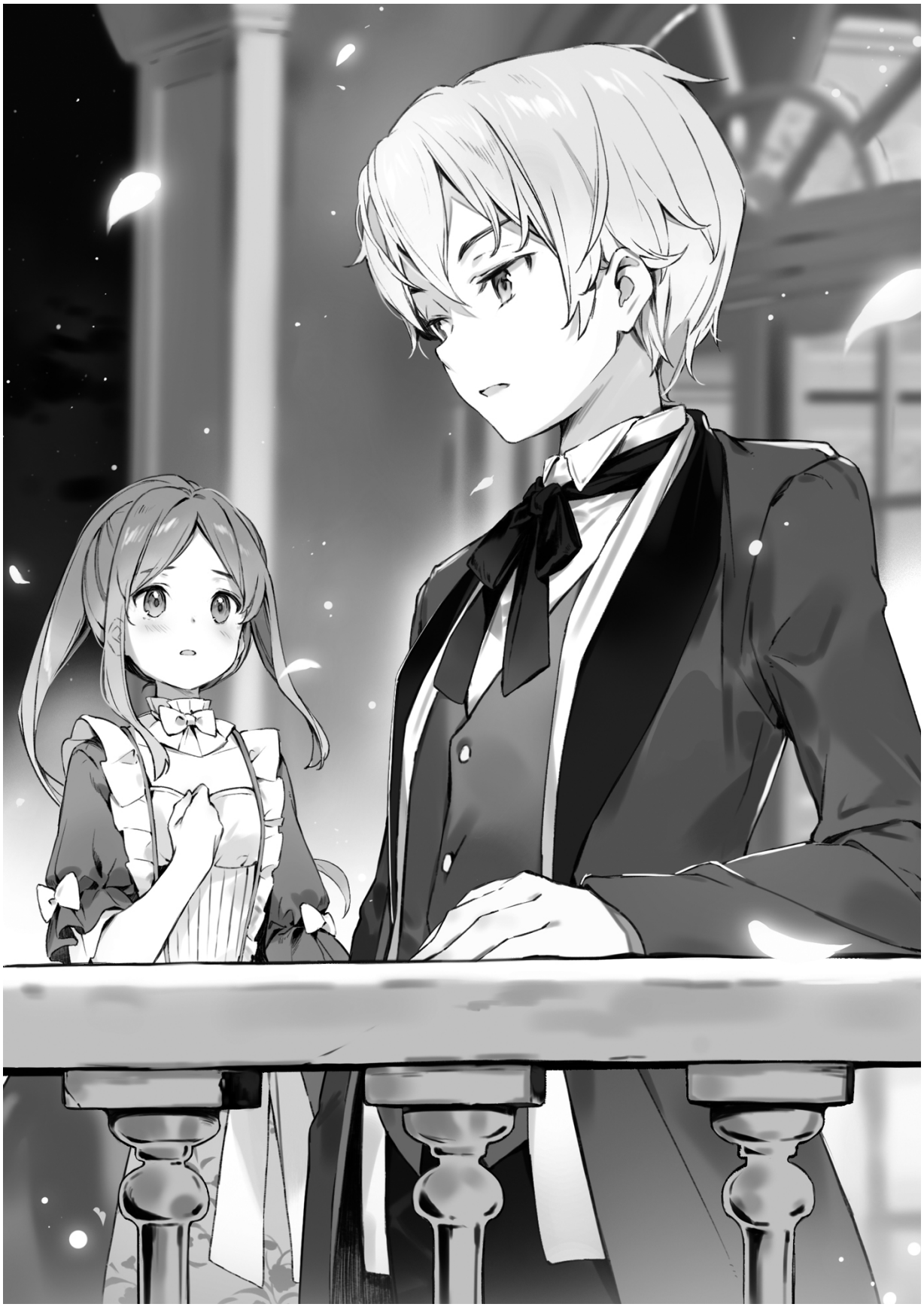
Sion arched an eyebrow, utterly confused by her question.

“Okay with what you did back there. You, um...looked like you were really enjoying yourself dancing with Her Highness.” Her voice lost some of its strength as she continued. “I thought that you might be, um...interested in Her Highness. Fond of her, I mean. But then you gave her up to Prince Abel, just like that...”

His confusion spread to his other brow, now equally arched.

“Well... I’m sure Abel was eagerly waiting his turn and would have been rather upset if I kept her all to myself the whole evening. There’s a protocol to these things, after all.”

Soon after answering, Sion grimaced. The insincerity of his words suddenly became glaringly blatant, not only to him but—judging by Tiona’s piercing gaze—her as well.



By the sun, she sees right through me, doesn't she? To keep dodging the question would do her a disservice.

With a head-shaking sigh, he ran his hand through his hair and sobered his tone.

"All right, fine, so maybe I *do* find myself drawn to her. But I blundered my chance. And grievously, at that."

The failure of Sunkland's Wind Crows weighed heavily on his conscience. Heavier yet were the sins he'd committed himself despite professing his dedication to upholding justice. They coated his soul like tar.

"What right do I have? What *nerve*? Besides...I'm the crown prince of Sunkland. Even if I harbored affection for Mia, it is an empty one. It cannot bear fruit."

"She wouldn't care about any of that."

Her words were like a blade, sharp and strong. They cut right through his haze of self-doubt.

"Her Highness is like, um...a great vessel. She's kind and generous because she can hold so much, and little things like these don't matter to her."

"Is she really?" Sion asked, knowing the question to be redundant. He himself was aware of the statement's truth.

Tiona nodded firmly and continued. "With all due respect, Prince Sion, you're going to regret this. Talk to her. Tell her how you feel, while you still can. Or..."

Sion heard the weight of experience in her voice. These were words speakable only by those who knew the taste of regret. Perhaps there had been a time when Tiona had held on to her words...and had forever lost the chance to speak them.

"Tell her while I still can, huh...?"

For the first time in his life, Sion began to think about his own feelings...and how they stirred in Mia's presence.

Now, while Sion was slowly coming to terms with his feelings, what exactly was the source of his frustrations doing?

"Mmm... This cake is absolutely exquisite! Abel, you need to try some too!"

Well, she was demonstrating the greatness of her vessel by stuffing a ton of food into it. In fact, she was on her third round of munching. Figuring

she'd recharge after dancing, she ate and ate. When she'd consumed enough to replenish the corresponding expenditure in energy, she kept eating, figuring it'd all be gone when the famine struck anyway, so she might as well stock up on her eating while she still could.

Mia was indeed a great vessel. She was just shaped more like a vat than a vase.

"How has the banquet been, Mia?" Just when a rub of her bulging tummy made Mia consider the possibility that she'd maybe eaten a little too much, a familiar voice entered her ears. She turned to find Rafina standing right behind her.

"My, Miss Rafina!"

Mia hastily rose from her chair. After their initial greeting upon her arrival, she'd been too busy shaking hands to chat with her. Well, shaking hands *and* dancing with Sion and Abel *and* stuffing her face with cake. The point is, she was busy! Still, worried that Rafina wouldn't find that line of reasoning very convincing, Mia promptly adopted the smile of a customer service worker dealing with a very important client.

Rafina, after taking a seat and gesturing for Mia to do the same, leaned over and lowered her voice. "By the way, Mia, I don't believe I received an invitation to this birthday of yours. I do hope I didn't cause any trouble by showing up."

"Huh?" Mia's mind went blank for a second. She stared agape as Rafina continued.

"Could it be that you *didn't* want me to come, and that's why you never sent an invitation?" Rafina asked with an upward glance. "I've been thinking about it ever since I got here, and the more I thought, the more worried I became. Maybe I'm not actually welcome here. I seem to be the only one who wasn't invited, after all..."

"Uh..." Sweat and chills ran hand in hand down Mia's back.

Rafina was right. Out of all the student council members, she was the only one who wasn't officially invited. Chloe wasn't here either, but being a commoner precluded her anyway. Everyone else—Sion, Abel, Tiona, even Sapphias—was present. The only noble who hadn't been asked to attend the festival...was Rafina.

Mia had excluded *Rafina* of all people from her birthday party! Think of

the implications!

There'd be no problem if the two of them didn't know each other very well. In that case, sending Rafina an invitation would look too much like a blatant political maneuver. If anything, purposefully excluding her from the guest list might actually reflect better on Mia as a demonstration of humility and principle, in that case. Rafina, at least, would have seen it that way.

But they *did* know each other. Very well, in fact. Their friendship, normally a blessing, was a curse in this situation, for it meant that Mia had effectively refused to invite a friend to her birthday party. There were only so many ways to interpret that, and none of them were good.

The chills grew stronger, and the sweat flowed faster.

"U-Um... You, uh, seemed so busy, Miss Rafina," said Mia in a trembling voice. "I-I didn't want to bother you. I mean, it's such a long journey to get here, and I didn't want to make you feel obligated with an invitation. It definitely wasn't because I didn't want you to come, nope. Never even crossed my mind. Actually, I'm delighted that you're here! L-Look, I'm so happy that I'm *literally* shaking."

To be fair, she was *mostly* telling the truth. Mia never had any desire to prevent Rafina from coming. She just decided not to mention the part where she got a little caught up in other things and sort of forgot to send her an invitation.

Rafina peered straight into her eyes. "Could it be that...you forgot?"

Mia's expression froze on her face. Fortunately, it was in the shape of a smile, which managed to conceal the expression she would have worn otherwise—abject horror.

Eeeeek! This is bad... This is really *bad! M-Miss Rafina can read minds sometimes, so I need to* not *think about how I forgot. Okay, I didn't forget! I definitely didn't forget! No forgetting in any shape or form has occurred!*

She desperately repeated the mantra to herself until she started to believe it. That's right, Mia didn't forget about Rafina! She was worried that Rafina was too busy, so she chose not to invite her!

I didn't forget, I didn't forget, I didn't forget, I didn't—

Her mental chanting was interrupted by a giggle as Rafina dropped her facade.

"Oh, you know I'm just teasing you, Mia. Gosh, you didn't have to take it so seriously."

The smile she showed was affable, but something about her eyes made Mia feel that it stopped just short of being entirely sincere.

Ooooh, what a terrible mistake I made. Now I'm going to have to invite Miss Rafina every single year. Also... She pursed her lips as something occurred to her. *I probably have some explaining to do, since she probably left the academy before Barbara got there.*

Along with Barbara, she'd sent a letter (read: bunch of excuses) to Belluga in which she emphatically highlighted the fact that she'd officially declared she had no intention of furthering the first emperor's plot.

If she never got a chance to read that letter, then I need to get her up to speed right away! Specifically, she has to hear the same spiel I gave Duke Yellowmoon so she doesn't make me take responsibility for the first emperor's nonsense. I wonder if there's a good place around here to have this conversation?

The banquet began to wrap up as she pondered her options.

"Miss Mia..."

Looking up, she found Esmeralda standing over her.

"My, Esmeralda. I haven't gotten a chance to thank you for coming today."

"No need. It's my best friend's birthday party, so of course I'd be here! I have to go now, but do look forward to the party we'll be hosting at the Greenmoon residence," Esmeralda said with a bright smile. "Oh, and one more thing: could you tell Prince Sion, Prince Abel, and Miss Rafina that they're all invited as well?"

Mia's birthday festival was a five-day event, during which she'd visit the various central nobility domains around the capital city. There was no set list of destinations. Every year, her itinerary was determined after considering input from the moon ministries. After the five days, each of the Four Dukes would then host their own banquets, all of which she was obligated to attend. It therefore came as no surprise that Esmeralda—being of the Greenmoons—had invited her to a follow-up party.

If I recall correctly, the Greenmoons usually hold their banquet at a villa in the capital instead of their main residence...which means I'll be staying in the capital for a while.

She clapped her hands as an idea came to her. "Oh, I just thought of something. Esmeralda, could you do me a favor?"

“A favor? Well, let’s hear it then.” Glad to be relied on, Esmeralda beamed with enthusiasm.

Mia regarded her and asked very casually, “I’d like you to fulfill your promise this winter.”

“My...promise?” A momentary frown was soon followed by comprehension. Her cheeks tightened slightly, and her expression gained a nervous edge.

Mia reassured her with a gentle smile. “Yes. The tea party you said you’d host for me, remember? You were going to treat me to some delicious, sugary cakes,” she said, referring to a promise made some months ago on the deserted island, but whose origins lay much further up the esoteric streams of time. “I’d also like you to invite Sapphias, Ruby, and Citrina too. There, at the party, we’ll swear together...”

She paused, the silence adding further weight to her next words.

“The oath to devote ourselves to the empire...and the welfare of all its subjects.”

More silence ensued as Esmeralda’s eyes grew wide.

For Esmeralda, this moment was a long time in the making. As the original proponent of the Clair de Lune assembly, she’d waited and waited for her vision to be realized in full. Now, at last, the stars had aligned around the moon, and they were to be united as one.

Chapter 4: The Tea Party of the Moon and Stars —Thus They Joined in Oath—

The Clair de Lune was an exclusive tea party open only to members of the Four Houses and Princess Mia. Originally conceptualized by Esmeralda, the event had already been hosted on a number of occasions in Saint-Noel Academy, but not once had it seen full attendance by all its potential members. Part of the reason was that the daughter of Duke Yellowmoon, Citrina, was unable to attend until she'd enrolled in the academy, but more to blame was the fact that the scions of the other Houses were often occupied with their own busy schedules. The only one with a perfect attendance score was Esmeralda herself. Both Sapphias and Ruby declined with ample frequency, citing scheduling conflicts. That day, however...

In a lush, spacious room in the Greenmoon residence, the three Etoilines and one Etoilin had gathered at last, sitting at a large round table in the middle. Leisurely banter filled the air.

"I have to say, though, I never thought the Clair de Lune would actually get all its members together, and at a time like this to boot. Considering how busy we all are right now, when I first got the notice, I figured you must have finally lost it."

Sapphias's gibe earned him a scowl from Esmeralda. "My, how rude, Sapphias. Are you accusing me of being obtuse?"

"Actually, I have to agree with Bluemoon this time," said Ruby in her characteristic casual manner. "Yes, yes, I can't believe I just said that either, but calling for a session on the second day of Her Highness's birthday festival is *pretty* high on the 'early signs of insanity' list." She took a sip of tea. "Hm, this tea's pretty good. Some sort of Perujin black?"

"I believe so," answered Esmeralda. "I got them from Miss Mia. She was nice enough to share some with me. Apparently, they're a gift from Princess Rania— Hm? What's that look supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing much," said Ruby. "It's just... You've changed a bit. Lost

some thorns, so to speak."

"My, what a strange comment. When have I ever had thorns?" asked Esmeralda with what seemed like genuine surprise. "But, hm... I suppose in a sense, I am indeed trying to change...into someone who can live up to the title of Miss Mia's best friend."

Ruby let out a noise that suggested she almost choked on her tea. The sincerity Esmeralda had displayed was bewildering.

"I see, I see," said Ruby, regathering herself. "Seems to me like we've all had our lives changed in some way by Her Highness. Gives a whole new meaning to 'Clair de Lune,' doesn't it? I assume the same goes for you too, O Lady of Yellow?"

She turned to the last member of the tea party, who'd been sitting quietly in her seat. The young girl's hair fluttered gently like a flower in the breeze as she looked up with a sweet smile.

"Yes, it's the same for Rina," said Citrina. "Maybe even more so."

"Well excuse me, but are you suggesting that my experiences are somehow less significant than yours?" said a piqued Esmeralda.

The comment even managed to extract a rare pout from Ruby, who also chimed in. "I second that. If it's gratitude toward Her Highness we're talking about, then I'm not losing to anyone."

Be it friendship or romance, each of the two girls had in their own way enjoyed a favor from Mia that had left a profound impression on them.

"All right, simmer down, ladies. It's not a contest. Also, Her Highness is going to be here soon. Let's all behave ourselves." Sapphias shook his head and proceeded to placate the glaring Etoilines. Personally, he considered it crass—and needlessly masochistic—to wedge himself between bickering women, but...

Circumstances are circumstances. I guess this is what they call "life experiences." The more you have the better, right? Maybe the ability to diffuse catfights will come in handy later, he thought with a sigh. *Besides, it'll be a problem if they squabble up a storm. Apparently, the topic today is supposed to be pretty serious. Something about those Chaos Serpents...*

The term had popped up with some frequency in the student council, but frankly, he still wasn't sure if he fully believed it.

Miss Rafina hasn't shown any doubt. The two princes seem convinced it's true as well. Which I guess means this group does indeed exist at the

very least.

The student council had been dealing with the group by themselves until recently. Now, they were about to reveal the nature of the threat to the Four Houses and establish an alliance against their foe. That was, at least, what Sapphias thought Mia intended to do at this meeting.

In that case, we can't afford any infighting. Unity is of the essence. If we can't maintain a united front, then the empire itself might collapse.

Driven by the sense that he was one of a few select members privy to crucial and confidential information, he'd felt obligated to step it up and be the adult in the room.

"Of course. You're right." At Sapphias's admonishment, Esmeralda backed down and gave a meek nod.

"Right. I also got too worked up." Ruby leaned back and sipped her tea, evidently trying to cool her head.

"I'm sorry. This was Rina's fault too. I shouldn't have said something so indelicate." With Citrina lowering her head in apology as well, tension faded from the air.

Sapphias, regarding the result of his handiwork, nodded in satisfaction. *Hey, I'm getting pretty good at this! Sapphias Bluemoon, professional conflict mediator. Hah. I guess getting pushed around in the student council is actually starting to pay off. I've taken another step forward on the path of adulthood!*

While Sapphias was feeling pretty good about himself, the swift resolution of the girls' dispute had, in fact, very little to do with him. The actual reason was fairly simple. Sapphias wasn't the only one who figured Mia was about to talk about some very important things; everyone else had managed to put two and two together as well.

Esmeralda knew. She'd been there on the deserted island when they discovered the empire's earth-shaking secret.

Ruby knew. She'd been involved in reshaping the Princess Guard into a force that could efficiently deal with a widespread years-long famine that Mia predicted would strike soon.

And finally, Citrina knew. She and her family had been freed from their age-old bond, and it was Mia who'd severed the chains.

As if cued by the lull in noise, the door to the room opened.

"Hello, everyone. Thank you very much for coming today. Let's start the tea party." Mia stepped in and smiled. "First, I need to apologize to everyone."

She lowered her head before continuing.

"I understand that the Clair de Lune normally does not admit anyone aside from the children of the Four Dukes and myself, but for this particular occasion, I'd like to request approval for the participation of two more individuals."

Turning around, she bade a figure behind her to enter. A girl appeared at the door, her aqua hair flowing like clear spring water.

"Oh? That's...Miss Rafina?" said a wide-eyed Ruby.

The other three around the table, however, did not share her surprise.

"Greetings, everyone," Rafina said with a short giggle. "Gosh, it's quite the novel experience to be meeting with you all outside of Saint-Noel."

She smiled politely at the four regulars. Mia, who was observing her from the side, couldn't help but shrink back a little; she knew the depths of terror that smile could strike into its recipients.

Granted, I doubt Miss Rafina ever truly needed permission to attend, but whatever...

Who in their right mind would ever defy Rafina? Mia could think of only one person who had the guts and was sufficiently nuts to attempt such a thing, and that was someone who unironically referred to himself as the Empire's Finest!

Though expected, Mia was nevertheless glad to find that Rafina's inclusion met with no resistance whatsoever. The primary purpose of this gathering was, after all, to put on a show for Rafina—her absence would defeat the point.

"And as for the other person... It's my indispensable advisor, Ludwig Hewitt. I'd like to request his admittance to this tea party as well."

She took a moment to close her eyes. Asking permission for Rafina was one thing. Doing the same for Ludwig was a very different matter. As a commoner, his presence at a function like this was, frankly, inappropriate. Still, she needed him here; his advice was the only thing that could pull her out of any holes she ended up digging herself into.

Her eyes snapped back open. Resolve flared in them as she proceeded to

justify Ludwig's presence. Which was a nicer way of saying "she started making excuses."

"I think of Ludwig as an extension of myself. He is my arm and mind, and the source of my wisdom. Most importantly, he shares my visions and my dreams. Treat him as you would me, for he is my soul in another body."

She glanced at Ludwig. He gave his glasses a slight prod before bowing deeply to the nobles in the room.

"As Her Highness introduced, I am Ludwig Hewitt, and though undeserved, the trust she has placed in me is something of which I strive to be worthy of with every ounce of my strength."

My, is it just me, or is Ludwig all fired up today? Good for him, I guess, but I wonder why... Then, Mia swept her gaze across the faces in the room. None showed any desire to object. *Huh, I expected a complaint or two...but everyone seems surprisingly accommodating today. Gah, I should have brought Abel and Sion too, then! If only I'd known...*

She inwardly grimaced at the missed opportunity.

"Now then, let's get this tea party started. Esmeralda, would you do the honors, please?" Mia said before taking a seat and waiting for cake and confections to appear before her.

They did. A lot of them did, in fact. There were three different varieties of cakes alone! One was a tart-like pastry containing baked apples. Another presented itself in the shape of a mountain, the top of which was covered in a generous amount of cream made from sweetmoon melon. The third was a pancake topped with a ring of nectar.

My... Sweets before serious talk, eh? I see that Esmeralda knows what's going on. Very impressive! Mia gained ninety excitement points, and her trust in Esmeralda rose by a hundred!

"All right, then..." Mia said quietly after gobbling up all the cake in front of her. "Shall we get down to business?"

"Hold on, Miss Mia." Esmeralda walked over and, as if Mia was her baby sister, gave the corner of her lips a wipe with a handkerchief. "There you go. *Now* you're ready for business."

Presumably, not being able to spend time with Mia during the Holy Eve Festival had left her feeling a little lonely, and she was making up for it by indulging in some big sister behavior. After a series of grumbling protests to

this mortifying treatment, Mia said, “Okay, there. It really is time for business now, though. Hm... But where should I begin?”

She shot a glance at Ludwig, who nodded with comprehension. “If I may, Your Highness... Allow me to initiate this conversation. I believe explaining the events in chronological order would be best, so let us begin with the attempted revolution in the Kingdom of Remno.”

He proceeded to tell the tale. His description touched on the existence of shadowy actors behind the scenes of the Remno incident. He spoke of Sunkland’s intelligence agency, the Wind Crows, its White Crow faction, and the infiltration of Serpents therein.

“Chaos Serpents, huh... And you’re saying these people had a hand in all this?” murmured a bewildered Ruby.

“What a shocking revelation...” Esmeralda said with equal consternation. “I had no idea there was so much going on under the surface of the Remno riots...”

“The fact that the intelligence network Sunkland had established in the empire was fully dismantled in the aftermath is, I suppose, a silver lining. We sent everyone back home, Wind Crows and White Crows alike,” explained Mia, taking a sip of tea before continuing. “Next, I think we need to talk about what happened during the summer holidays...”

She turned to Esmeralda, who tensed up a little but nodded.

“Very well, then. As a matter of fact, Miss Mia and I went on a cruise in the summer. Oh, and we were accompanied by Prince Sion and Prince Abel,” Esmeralda said, her tone taking on a hint of pride during the latter sentence. “And during the cruise, we landed on an uninhabited island, where we discovered something that absolutely floored us.”

“Something that floored you?” Ruby asked with a dubious look.

Mia nodded deeply before declaring in dramatic fashion, “We discovered an inscription left by Tearmoon’s first emperor. It spoke of the empire’s rise, as well as its connection to the Chaos Serpents.”

She proceeded to explain why exactly the first emperor had founded the Tearmoon Empire, his desire to curse this land, and how that had led to the rampant anti-agriculturalist beliefs afflicting the empire. She spoke smoothly and confidently, as if she’d rehearsed the speech over and over. Which, of course, she had. She’d had Ludwig put together a script for her, then took to memorizing the whole thing. Specifically, she’d written out her

speech on pancakes with nectar, and every time she managed to commit one pancake's worth of lines to memory, she'd gobble it up. Despite the apparent absurdity of this memorization method, it'd somehow worked like a charm. It had worked so well, in fact, that she decided to name it the "pancake technique" of memorization. Anyway, moving on from this tangent...

"The first emperor..." Ruby murmured.

"That...does explain a lot," said Sapphias. "Now that I think about it, there does seem to be a deep-seated bias against agriculture in our ranks. It's apparent among the central nobility, including those under the Bluemoon banner. It shames me to say that even I have looked down on farmers as the descendants of serfs before." He grimaced at the admission.

"Then, there's the House of Yellowmoon," continued Mia, "who were given a secret mission by the first emperor. Right, Rina?"

She directed her gaze toward Citrina, who stiffened slightly before nodding.

"Yes. We Yellowmoons were given a special order by the first emperor..."

Citrina started telling the story of the secret held by the House of Yellowmoon and its generations of Dukes. The immensity of its scale and the depths of its tragedy left the room speechless. While the listeners were reeling from this historical revelation, Mia gestured for another cup of tea, and into its milky goodness she promptly began adding sugar. The motion was natural—almost subconscious—but it was halted by a whisper.

"Your Highness, I beg your indulgence, but I've been asked to limit your consumption of sugar...by Miss Anne."

Ludwig's admonishing voice entered her ear, eliciting a pained groan. With great reluctance, she righted the sugar dispenser.

Eventually, Citrina finished her story. She breathed out and closed her eyes. There was a calmness to her—an inner peace, almost—evoking the air of a convict who'd finished confessing her crimes and waited only for the executioner's blade.

The meeting's attendees all stared uncomfortably at the girl who associated with the Chaos Serpents, possessed encyclopedic knowledge of poisons, and had conspired to assassinate Mia. None was sure what to make of her.

“To dispel any potential misunderstandings, let me make it clear that I do not believe Rina bears any personal guilt. What she did, she did at the command of the first emperor. I do, however, understand that absolving the whole House of Yellowmoon of all responsibility would be poorly received by many, so some degree of atonement is necessary. The specifics of that atonement, I’ve left to the current Lord Yellowmoon to handle, but whatever the consequences, I believe it shouldn’t impact Rina in any way. Again, I must reiterate that this is a finished matter. It has been laid to rest, and I strongly urge everyone to refrain from digging it up again!”

In other words: *Yes, I know the first emperor made a royal mess of things, but can we just move on so things don’t get even more complicated?*

The families of the Four Dukes were all blood relatives of the emperor, so any suggestion of Mia inheriting responsibility for the first emperor’s sins would implicate all the young scions present. Their interests were probably aligned with hers. The one wild card that scared her was Rafina, but a sneaky glance revealed no particular anger in her expression. Rather, she was observing Mia with a gentle smile! Mia shuddered in fear nonetheless; her cowardice would not be pacified by a mere gentle smile. After regaining her composure, she turned to Ruby.

“Instead of dwelling on the past, I feel a need for us to unite ourselves against what awaits us in the future.”

“And what, exactly, awaits us in the future?” asked Sapphias.

“Something that, as a matter of fact, I’ve already asked Ruby to start preparing for. But now, I shall share this knowledge with everyone. Soon, a widespread famine lasting several years will strike the whole of the continent.”

“W-Wait, but...” stuttered Sapphias, shocked by her declarative tone. “Are you saying you can see into the future?”

“Not all of it, no...but it’s an undeniable fact that we’re seeing poor yields across the board.”

Mia cued Ludwig with her eyes.

“That is correct,” he said with a nod. “We already anticipate a significant decline in harvests next year. The cold summer this year has stunted crop growth.”

“Th-That can’t be...” Citrina’s voice trembled with dread. Being intimately familiar with the Chaos Serpents’ methods and goals, she knew

all too well what would happen if a famine were to befall the empire. “A-Are you sure, Your Highness? If that happens...”

“Don’t worry, Rina. It will happen, but we’ve prepared for it. Right, Ludwig?”

Mia visually cued Ludwig again.

“Yes,” he answered, nodding more soberly this time. “At Her Highness’s command, we made every effort to stockpile food. Even if a famine strikes, we should have enough provisions to weather the damage. Perujin Agricultural Country, Ganudos Port Country, and the Forkroads purchasing wheat from afar... So long as these channels of food acquisition are sustained, our people will not go hungry.”

“And to make sure those acquisition routes are protected,” Mia added, “I’ve asked Ruby to devise an operational plan for the Princess Guard. Rumors of food shortage will incite unease, which might result in riots. Angry mobs might attack transport carts. Furthermore...the Chaos Serpents will surely take advantage of the situation to cause more chaos and destruction.”

Mia continued her cuing streak, shifting her gaze toward Ruby this time.

“I’ve worked with the Princess Guard to fence off this possibility,” said Ruby, nodding. “And if push comes to shove, we Redmoons are prepared to commit a portion of our private army to bolster our operational capacity.”

That brought Sapphias to his feet.

“Brilliant! In that case, you must speak to us about that plan afterward. I have no doubt we Bluemoons have something to offer as well.”

“I’ll send someone with the details, then,” said Ruby.

Beside her, Esmeralda crossed her arms and pitched in.

“We also need to make sure Ganudos doesn’t get any funny ideas. A firmly-worded reminder might help. Miss Citrina, could the Yellowmoons send a messenger their way? I understand that your house has had ties with them for a long time, yes?”

Citrina nodded at the proposition.

As talks ensued, no one seemed to doubt the validity of Mia’s prediction. If she said there was a famine coming, then there must be. All discussion proceeded under the assumption that her claim was true. Mia spent some time observing from the sidelines before once again requesting attention with a clap of her hands.

“Now then... I think it’s time for us to move on to the most important topic of the day.”

“The most important topic... What might that be, Miss Mia?”

Esmeralda spoke for the rest of the room. In response, Mia took a slow sip of tea, as though clearing her mind.

Mmm... Unsweetened milk tea really does pale in comparison. It’s only half as tasty at best.

Her mind was definitely clear...of anything relevant to the discussion, anyway.

After a deep exhalation, she was finally ready to speak...about why she’d arranged for a meeting in a place like this today. She did, in fact, have a very good reason.

“My, Esmeralda, I thought you of all people would know. Don’t you remember what I said about wanting you to host a tea party? And what I wished for us to swear together?” she asked, alluding to the memory of a promise so distant yet so vivid. “I seek a united oath to devote ourselves to the empire. But *what* empire? What is the nature of this empire to which we’ll be swearing our loyalty?”

Her question shook her listeners. “What...empire...?” The murmured words trickled from multiple mouths.

Unease clouded their faces, for moments before, they’d just been told the dreadful foundation upon which this empire had been crafted. It existed to drench the fertile moon-shaped land with tears of suffering. Through the spreading of the curse of anti-agriculturalism, civil wars would erupt, blood would be spilt by the gallon, and the land as a whole would meet a ruinous end. How could they possibly swear their loyalty to such a wicked ideal? Among the disconcerted nobles, Esmeralda alone sat composed. She’d already gotten a glimpse at the essence of Mia’s thoughts on the island.

Sweeping her gaze across the room, Mia slowly nodded at them. “I know what you’re thinking. And you’re right. Swearing our loyalty to such an empire would be *preposterous*.”

She spat the final word. There was good reason for her contempt—her head had once rolled as a result. She’d endured Ludwig’s endless nagging, toiling through sweat and tears in a desperate attempt to right the empire, only to have it tip over anyway. Considering the first emperor was the fundamental reason for this upsetting development, saying that she held a

deep grudge would be an understatement.

"Preposterous. Truly and absolutely preposterous!" she repeated, resisting the urge to start stomping about the floor in a frustrated tantrum. Eventually, she got a hold of herself and took a deep breath. "Anyway... The point is that I've made up my mind. And I'm of the mind to tear up this ridiculous arrangement from our ancestors. Whatever oath they swore, it is now done and over with!"

She took a peek at Rafina as she spoke. Having her hear this spiel was, after all, why she'd called her here in the first place. The goal was to drive home the point that whatever promises had been made with the first emperor, she'd officially retracted them. Consequently, going forward, if any nobles happened to do something stupid in accordance with the first emperor's wishes, it'd have nothing to do with her.

"And it's not just the Yellowmoons. As you're surely aware, every Tearmoon noble, when they become head of their house, must take an oath to devote themselves to the empire. Well, I declare right here and right now that all of those oaths are officially null and void. You no longer have any obligation to swear loyalty to the empire."

"What? But Your Highness, that's..."

A flabbergasted Sapphias blinked at Mia, who smiled quietly back at him.

"But I do have a request for you. With your former obligations rescinded, I ask...that you swear a new oath together with me."

"A new oath...?"

"Yes. Not an ancient one that dooms our moon-shaped land to tears of suffering. I seek a new oath, in which we pledge our loyalty to an empire where the peace and prosperity of all is our goal." Mia closed her eyes. The pause lent further weight to her ensuing words. "And I mean *all*. Not just all nobles, but all the empire's subjects. We shall work toward a Tearmoon where every soul residing on this moon-shaped land will drench the crescent in tears of joy. *That* is the empire to which I ask you to pledge your loyalty. And *that* is the oath I'd like you to swear together with me."

Mia's wish was thus laid bare. A nation exists for the prosperity of its people. That goes without saying. However, some nobles operated with a definition of "people" that excluded the common populace. These nobles sought only their own prosperity. They were also more than glad to trample

their subjects in the process.

But that wouldn't do. Mia was painfully aware—she once had the scar to show for it—that these nobles were effectively a guillotine magnet. Let them do their thing, and she'd soon find a terrifying wooden figure charging toward her at great speed. So, she stated it in explicit terms: her empire would exist for the prosperity of *all* subjects. It was a final nail in the coffin of disingenuous discourse, ensuring no one could willfully misinterpret her words. It was also to make sure she didn't end up in said coffin.

"Of course, this would be a secret oath sworn personally among ourselves. Normally, a covenant like this would have to be pledged between His Majesty and the current heads of each house, each of whom must take the oath in turn, but—"

She was cut off by Esmeralda, who suddenly stood up and walked over to her.

"Miss Mia..." She lowered herself onto her knees. "I, Esmeralda Etoile Greenmoon, hereby swear this oath with Her Highness Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon."

One by one, the other Etoiles followed suit. Citrina, Sapphias, and Ruby all kneeled before Mia and swore in turn.

"Everyone..." Mia whispered.

They were roused by the sound of clapping. Turning toward the source, they found Rafina applauding them with a kind smile.

"Wonderful, Mia. That was absolutely wonderful! Etoilins and Etoilines swearing together with their princess...a new oath between the moon and stars. I, Rafina Orca Belluga, shall be your witness."

She quietly pressed her hands to her chest and uttered a prayer. "May the oath you have hereupon sworn be blessed by the Lord and graced with holy favor."

Her quiet, saintly words marked the conclusion of this special instance of the Clair de Lune.

After the Clair de Lune drew to a close, Mia returned to her room and immediately dove into bed.

"Ugh... I'm so tired. And I'm not even halfway through the birthday festival. Not that I didn't see this coming, but this whole thing has taken a serious mental toll..." she muttered into her pillow as she rubbed her

tummy. Little did she know, the source of her fatigue was, in fact, gastrointestinal. Her gut was exhausted from all the overeating.

As she turned her head, the cover of *The Chronicles of Saint Princess Mia*, which she'd borrowed from Bel and failed to give back, leapt into view.

"Ah, that reminds me... I borrowed it thinking I'd read it over again. Maybe I should actually do that..."

With an effortful grunt, she pushed herself up and grabbed the book. As she regarded it, a sigh escaped her lips.

"Ah, right. That also reminds me... In the end, unless I become empress, I'm still going to get assassinated..."

She had, in truth, been pretty satisfied with her accomplishments to date. Unfortunately, the harsh reality was that the root cause of her death had yet to be resolved.

"But Tearmoon has never had an empress before... Hmm..."

A sequence of frustrated grumbling followed, ending with her toppling back onto her pillow.

"I'll have to announce my intention to become empress at some point, won't I? And the one thing I know for sure is that the timing is important. If I screw up the timing, I can kiss my empress dreams goodbye... But maybe there's still a way... If I pull exactly the right strings, maybe things will work out without me becoming empress. Ugh, I wish someone would just tell me which strings I have to pull..."

Hoping the book would mention something along those lines, she began to flip it open only to be interrupted by a knock at her door.

"Milady, Ludwig is here to see you," said Anne as she entered.

"My, Ludwig? I wonder what he wants." Mia pursed her lips.

He didn't mention anything back at the tea party. What could he possibly want to see me for? Oh, but since he's here, I might as well have him help me figure out a way to make everything work out without becoming empress.

When it came to truancy, Mia spared no effort. In other words, she did not slack off when it came to slacking off.

"Show him in, then. I'd like to speak with him as well, actually."

With all the speed and dexterity of a lazy panda, she sat up, shuffled off the bed, and headed to her private chamber.

Next to her bedroom was a separate chamber that functioned as her primary living space. Optimized for snacking, a large table had been placed in the middle of the room so she could satisfy her cravings at a moment's notice. The highly private nature of this space made it off-limits to others. It also made it *perfect* for secret meetings.

"Please forgive my sudden intrusion, Your Highness," said Ludwig.

"I don't mind. I've been meaning to ask you a few things too, so it's good timing, really. Let's begin with you, though."

Mia brought the cup of tea that Anne had prepared to her lips. *Mmm, Anne's getting pretty good at brewing black tea.*

"First, I must offer my sincerest compliments for your performance at the Clair de Lune," Ludwig said in a serious tone. "It was truly awe-inspiring. I never thought the Four Houses could be rallied in such a fashion."

Mia chuckled contently.

"Oh, please! It wasn't much. Besides, having the Four Houses work together will make things a lot easier down the line."

The Rafina-oriented propaganda aside, it was true that she was counting on the Four Houses' help to confront the famine. Instilling a shared sense of urgency in them couldn't hurt. Ludwig's praise was simply icing on the cake. It was delicious icing, though, and she was very much looking forward to gulping down more.

"The majestic fashion in which you wore the imperial color as well... I could hardly believe my eyes. Even now, my chest wells with emotion at the memory. Magnificent, Your Highness. Truly magnificent."

While Ludwig continued to gush, Mia couldn't help but feel that the sheer enthusiasm with which he spoke was a little off-putting.

"...Uh, just so we're on the same page, you're talking about the dress I wore, right? The one Anne prepared for me?" she asked.

"The imperial color"? I wonder what he means by that...

"Indeed. Nothing gives me greater pleasure than to know our hearts are aligned in vision and aspiration."

"...Huh?"

Mia blinked blankly at him. *Our hearts are aligned? What in the moons is he talking about?*

Ludwig nodded firmly at her, as if to dispel her doubts.

"Rest assured, Your Highness, that there are many in the empire who wish to see you seated upon the throne."

"...Huh?"

He regarded her with fervent eyes and spoke with increasing zeal.

"Your ascension to empress is now our foremost goal. My associates and I are prepared to do everything in our power, and more if necessary, to see it through. Balthazar is already helping, and I'm in the process of acquiring the support of my colleagues who studied under Master Galv. I've also assembled a list of officials in the various moon ministries who hold promise..."

"*...Huh?*"

A tidal wave was forming under her very feet, and it had every intention of carrying her all the way to the imperial throne.

And so, a new oath was sworn between the moon and stars, creating a new branch down which the current of history now flowed.

"Uh..."

Even Mia, who prided herself on esophageal prowess, found this sudden series of developments too much to swallow. The gullet of fate, however, had no such reservation. It swallowed her and her reservations alike, sending them careening down the new path. Where would these surging waters take her? Only time would tell...

Part 3: A New Oath Between the Moon and Stars Fin

To Be Continued in Part 4: To the Moon-Led Morrow

Part 4: To the Moon-Led Morrow

Prologue: It Begins with Mushroom Stew...

“Ooh... Ooooh...”

The sound of a simmering pot. The slow melting of softened veggies. The tantalizing aroma of well-boiled chicken. The ambermoon tomato soup serving as a base. All of these were marvelous, yet they all paled in comparison to the lovely little caps poking out of the stew’s center—mushrooms, many different varieties of mushrooms.

There were black, frilly ones. White ones with caps the size of a small dish. Small clustered ones that grew in clumps. There were mushrooms upon mushrooms. It was mushrooms galore!

None of them were anything special—no, they weren’t “premium” mushrooms that could lure an unsuspecting nose from half the room away with their irresistible aroma. These were the mundane, everyday strains cherished by forest hunters for dinner stews. Perfect for Mia, in fact, because she very much preferred the flavor of these homelier varieties!

Now, Mia was no bigot. She understood that all mushrooms were equal. There were no mycological castes, no intrinsic superiority that any one fungus possessed over another. Premium mushrooms were delicious in their own premium way, and she very much recognized that. However, there were other mushrooms that just made for better stew.

Ever since she tasted the hare stew, Mia’s food hierarchy had experienced a seismic shift in which stews were elevated to the uppermost tier. In other words, what lay before her wasn’t a stew of plebeian mushrooms—it was culinary heaven! *She loved it to bits!*

As an aside, in the process of honing her survival skills, she’d become familiar with edible mountain plants too, which meant her palate was steadily progressing toward that of...old grandmas living in the countryside. Make of that what you will.

“Oh... Ooooh... Ooooooooh...”

Her hand trembled with emotion as she brought her fork over one of the simmering delicacies. With a gulp, she poked at it with a prong. The white shape undulated in the stew. So tantalizing was the motion that she nearly began drooling. Her eyes locked on the Belluga mushroom, she plunged the fork into its ivory flesh and lifted it up. It quivered. Slowly, she brought it to her mouth...and devoured the whole thing in one bite.

“Mmm... Mmmmmph...”

Belluga mushrooms were known for their exquisite flavor, which now crept across her tongue. She rolled it around in her mouth, blowing out hot breaths as she did. The harmonious blend of soup and juice was nothing short of bliss for her taste buds.

As it cooled, she bit into it. There was a chewiness that allowed for some munching. It added to the experience. A profound sense of fulfillment filled her chest as she savored the wonderful texture.

“Ah, it’s so good... So this is what mushroom stew tastes like. Simply sublime!”

That’s right. At the dawn of a new year, Mia had finally gotten the chance to enjoy the mushroom stew party she’d been waiting to throw for so long. It was hosted at Anne’s former home, where her family currently lived. Bel, the shrewd little thing, had tagged along for the trip and now sat beside Mia with the same expression on her face and the very same bulge in her cheeks.

In truth, Mia had wanted to throw the party with the student council members, but they were all busy people. Sion, Abel, and Rafina had all returned to their respective homes.

“It’s a shame, really... We couldn’t have a party during the Holy Eve Festival, so I was looking forward to making up for it with this one...”

The mushroom stew was still tasty, of course. That didn’t change because of missing party-goers. Her enjoyment, however, did.

Not that the party today was boring though. Anne’s family and Miabel were there. Tiona and Lynsha too, the latter of whom still had bandages around her head. Coincidentally, Chloe happened to be in town, adding another member to the list. The party itself had no shortage of liveliness.

Chloe’s father, Marco Forkroad, who’d come to the capital to handle some wheat deals, caught wind of Mia’s love for mushrooms, so he sent Chloe with an assorted mushroom basket as a gift, leading to the current

mushroom stew party.

"My! Nothing beats a mushroom with some *texture*. It's just the right amount of toughness."

"It really is, isn't it, Gran— I mean Miss Mia!" said Bel, emulating Mia's one-bite-hot-breath technique as she savored her own mouthful of mushroom.

Mia gazed at the blissful faces encircling the pot and nodded with satisfaction.

"This is what mushroom stew is all about." Mushroom stew wasn't *just* about the stew. It needed the laughter, the chitchat—and glee was the final seasoning. She smiled and turned toward Chloe. "Thank you, Chloe. And thank your father for me too. We all owe him a great deal for this wonderful gift."

"Oh, no need to thank us! It's our pleasure!" said Chloe, hands held up diffidently.

Mia shook her head. "Chloe, I am of the belief that gratitude should beget grateful action. Your father did us a great favor, so I'd like to repay him appropriately."

"By that logic, I owe you a ton too, so my father's gift should be considered us paying you back. We're square now, so don't worry about it," she smilingly argued. "Besides, I received such a warm welcome here at the capital, and had the chance to talk so much about my favorite books. And..." She paused for a moment to glance at Elise. "I got to know your court author. My hands are *still* shaking. What an amazing experience."

Mia giggled. "My, you must have had quite the chat with Elise. I'm glad you found a new book buddy."

As a fellow book lover, Mia knew how Chloe felt. Hearing Elise talk about novels was delightful. It mattered not whether she had them written out; her ideas alone were plenty riveting. Well, *most* of them. Mia had admittedly done a double take when she'd come across a section in a past romance novel by Elise that involved an "Operation Handkerchief Drop" to get the attention of a boy. She still wasn't quite sure how to feel about that. But that was a special case. For books lovers, meeting an author was, as a rule, a priceless occasion befitting squeals of glee.

"Yes, I'm glad you're enjoying yourself," continued Mia. "But still, gratitude should be shown where gratitude is due. At the very least, do tell

Sir Marco that he's welcome to consult me if he ever runs into any trouble. I'd be more than happy to help."

After all, the wheat distribution channels controlled by Forkroad & Co. were literal lifelines for Mia. If there was any trouble concerning them, she definitely wanted to hear about it as soon as possible. Truthfully, such political considerations were supplementary at best. She mostly wanted to thank him because she was thrilled to receive his mushroom basket, and it had put her in an extra generous mood.

"Princess Mia..." said Chloe, moved by Mia's words. "All right. I'll tell him."

Just then...

"Uh, excuse me, Princess Mia," Lynsha said, interrupting. "Do you have a moment? There's something I'd like to discuss with you."

"My, Lynsha. Certainly. But I must say..." Mia chuckled a little at Lynsha's stiff expression. "Having you act so formally around me is going to take some getting used to."

"Oh, stop it already, Princess Mia." Lynsha sighed, releasing some tension with the breath. She lowered her voice to barely above a whisper. "It's about milady Bel."

Chapter 1: Princess Mia...Be Spitting Facts

"Mmm... I think I might have eaten too much..."

Mia patted her tummy. A belch escaped her throat.

Hm, is it just me or...does my belly feel a little different...?

It was a little too plump for her liking.

Oh well. It's probably fine. Chloe did say that winter is when animals stockpile food. It's the same with me. I put on some weight during the winter, and I'll slim back down later. That's all it is. I'm just following the rhythm of nature. Probably.

Surely, when spring rolled around, she'd be back to her slender self. It was only natural. Probably.

Comforted by this somewhat dubious logic, Mia turned around and gestured for Lynsha to enter.

"All right, come on in."

"Thank you very much."

With a hint of nervousness, Lynsha stepped into Mia's room. Then, she looked curiously around the room before pursing her lips with a frown.

"Hm? Is something the matter?" asked Mia, who retraced Lynsha's visual steps but found nothing out of place.

Nothing out of place, nothing in poor taste... Nothing weird at all, in fact. Granted, I did *want to put up a mushroom bed as decoration, but Anne wasn't having it, so that didn't happen. I'm pretty sure nothing's out of the ordinary.*

For the record, a bunch of sickle moon radishes—top half only—sitting in water on the windowsill definitely counted as "out of the ordinary." This was courtesy of a book that had given her an idea about how to solve the empire's impending food shortage. The idea's feasibility notwithstanding, it certainly made for an interesting piece of decor.

Lynsha spent some time studying the inside of the room. Eventually, she

placed her arms at her hips. “Well,” she said, nodding to herself. “I guess you really *are* a princess.”

Mia arched an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry? What do you—” She stopped, realization dawning as she glanced down at her own attire. “Ah, right. My clothes were...a little simpler when we first met. I suppose I can’t blame you for wondering if I really was a princess.”

One thought led to another, and she began to wonder if her contingency plans for a revolution in the empire were excessive. Maybe just changing into peasant garb would be enough to make a clean getaway.

“That’s...not exactly what I meant, but...” For a moment, it seemed like Lynsha would elaborate, but she ultimately shook her head before bowing respectfully. “Thank you very much for taking the time to speak to me today.”

“There’s no need for formalities. If anything, I should be thanking you,” replied Mia, grimacing as she glanced at the bandages around Lynsha’s head. “You got hurt because of Bel... I’m terribly sorry that happened to you.” She lowered her head. “If there’s anything I can do to make up for it, please tell me. I’ll spare no expense,” she added in a sober tone.

“Um... No, it’s fine. The wound isn’t too deep. It just bled a lot because it’s on my head.” Lynsha gave a tight smile and shook her head. “Honestly, the person I’m most upset at is myself. How is it that a little knock on the head was all it took to put me out of action? Ugh, it’s shameful.”

“I see... Well, I’m glad you’re not hurt badly, at least.”

Mia seated herself at a table, across which Lynsha did the same. Anne promptly showed up with two cups of black tea—the perfect beverage for post-meal chatter.

“All right. Let’s hear it then. What did you want to discuss?” asked Mia. “Oh no, don’t tell me Bel is in danger of repeating a year.”

“Bel? What— Oh, she’s doing fine. I think.”

“...You *think*?” Mia felt an unsettling sense of déjà vu at the hesitant response.

“Sh-She’s trying her best!” Lynsha hastily added. “She really is. So I’m...pretty sure she’ll be okay. Probably.”

“...Probably.”

Though Mia felt a growing certainty that Bel probably *would not* be

okay, she refrained from further comment. Instead, she chose to trust that Bel would be okay. And Mia, well, she would slim down when spring rolled around. Both these things would prove true. Probably. Concluding the tangent on a note of extreme and arguably desperate optimism, she resumed the original topic.

"Anyway... If that's not it, then what did you want to talk about?"

Lynsha didn't answer immediately. She stirred her tea, as though appreciating its color. A sip and a breath later, she finally fixed Mia with a look of mustered resolve.

"Princess Mia, are you aware of milady's...*habit*?"

"Her habit?" Mia blinked at the unexpected question. "Well, I'm sure she has plenty of odd habits... What's bothering you, exactly?"

"She keeps giving people gold as a way of thanking them. A lot of it, actually," Lynsha said in a flat, matter-of-fact manner.

"My! Are you serious?" Mia exclaimed, eyes widening at this revelation. "B-Bel has a habit of giving people tons of gold?"

"So you *didn't* know. I thought so..." Lynsha shook her head. "Bel said she was pretty sure you wouldn't be opposed to her doing it, so I figured she hadn't asked explicitly."

"She certainly hasn't! This is the first time I'm hearing about such a thing!"

If what Lynsha said was true, then Mia had a serious problem on her hands. As the saying goes, a squandered coin a day keeps the guillotine coming your way.

...No, there's definitely no such saying, but the point stands.

"Are you sure Bel's been doing that?"

"Yes. I've seen her do it a couple of times already with the allowance you give her."

It was true that Mia had been supplying Bel with a handy sum of money in case of emergencies, but...

I never knew she has a habit of wasting money! What's the point of me working so hard to save money if she's just doling it all out to people?

More baffling was the reason behind this behavior. What in the moons would drive Bel to do such a thing? The future she'd come from was certainly not one where gold coins could be handed out as reward. In fact, *nobody* went around giving out money like that, future or not. Where had

she even learned to do that?

"Milady did mention it's something she absolutely has to do, no matter what..." said Lynsha with a troubled frown.

Mia let out a frustrated grunt. "Absolutely has to, you say... Hmm, I think it's time for a *talk*."

The day following her talk with Lynsha, Mia decided to get to the bottom of this situation. She didn't want to summon Bel to the palace, but that meant she'd have to head over to where Anne's parents lived. A look out the window dissuaded her of this option. It was snowing, and snow meant cold. Mia didn't like the cold.

"Hm... I guess I can't hide Bel forever. Maybe I should take this chance to introduce her to father..." She mulled over the idea. "I mean, I could ask Miss Rafina or even Sion to accommodate her, but if I want her to be able to move around in the empire, I should at least get father to acknowledge her existence. I can tell him she's my sworn sister. Or, since she gets along well with Rina, I can ask Duke Yellowmoon— Oh, but it's dangerous there with all their poisonous herbs and stuff. Maybe the easiest way is to just have her be a commoner and stay at Anne's place for a while. Hmm... These are all things I'll have to talk to her about."

Having come up with enough reasons to justify summoning Bel to the palace—and mask the fact that they were really just excuses not to head out into the cold—she made up her mind. At the end of the day, Mia just wasn't the type to see snow and feel an urgent desire to dive into its fluffy embrace. She much preferred diving into *bed*. So, she asked Anne to go fetch Bel.

"I do wonder though... What's gotten into her? Why is she wasting so much money?"

Bel was supposed to have been raised by Anne and Elise, and taught by Ludwig.

"Plus, she told me she deeply admires her grandmother Mia, aka me. If she admires me, then it makes no sense for her to reward people by giving them gold coins."

That was the prodigal's method. It reflected a certain philosophy—that every problem could be, or at least should be, solved by throwing money at it. Mia knew all too well where this line of reasoning led. The more one

relied on money to solve problems, the more their need for money would balloon. There was no limit to it. It was a hard lesson for her, earned after much sweat and toil trying to find food during her famine days.

Ludwig, ever the proponent of rational approaches, could theoretically view it as a means to an end. Mia couldn't imagine him telling Bel to act like *that* though. The ethical implications surely would have made him think twice. As for Anne and Elise... They were more the types to blow their top if they ever caught wind of Bel's little habit.

It couldn't have been taught. This was something Bel had come up with on her own. These were the thoughts that occupied Mia's head as she directed the stand-in maid to prepare enough sweets and hot tea for her, Bel, Anne, and Lynsha. Securing supply lines was a tactical imperative, and Mia was becoming quite the accomplished tactician...at least when it came to acquiring sugar. With plates laid and cups mounted, it was all quiet on the munchies front as she awaited the arrival of her guests.

Eventually, there was a knock on the door.

"Excuse me, milady." Anne bowed. "I've brought Miss Bel."

"Ah, good. Come on in."

Mia welcomed the three arrivals into her room.

"Thank you, Anne. You too, Bel and Lynsha. It must have been cold out there. Let's get you warmed up first with some tea. We have sweets too. Feel free to try some," she said, gesturing toward the table.

"Wow! The cakes look delicious! Thank you, Miss Mia!" exclaimed a delighted Bel.

Mia regarded her granddaughter with a gentle smile.

After satiating her stomach with a generous amount of tea and sweets, Mia turned her attention to Bel.

"By the way, Bel, I happened to hear that when you head out to the market to go shopping...you've been handing people gold coins and telling them to keep the change as thanks?"

"Pardon the interruption, Princess Mia, but I'd like to mention that I've also been handed *silver* coins as thanks before," said Lynsha, who produced the evidence. "These were given to me by milady the other day when I was hit over the head in the forest by that old witch. She told me it's repayment for everything I did for her... So I'm giving it back to you now. I don't want

to be thanked or repaid like this. I already receive a salary directly from Miss Rafina for what I do."

Lynsha smiled at Bel as she pressed the silver into her small hands.

Mia studied Lynsha's expression. *Yes, she's definitely a little angry.*

The way Lynsha's smile wasn't matching the glare in her eyes was actually sort of terrifying. Not wanting to court trouble, Mia decided to join her in questioning Bel.

"Well then," Mia continued. "Would you like to explain yourself?"

"Oh, uh, sure," Bel nervously started. "It's because..."

Bel looked quickly at Anne and Lynsha before leaning into Mia's ear.

"The people I gave gold coins to are the people who helped me a lot when I was younger. I felt like I had to thank them somehow, and the most valuable thing I could give them was gold, so I used that," whispered Bel.

"When you were younger..."

Mia crossed her arms.

I see... So this was during the civil war future of the empire, and the people running these stores must have treated her well during that time.

In her future world, Bel was both a fugitive and a powerless young child. Even if she deeply appreciated the kindness shown to her by others, she had no way of repaying them. Gratitude toward others and the desire to give back to them...were emotions Mia knew all too well. She'd received so much from Anne, and she hadn't been able to give back anything in return. The regret she'd felt when the guillotine blade had fallen was as vivid now as it had been then. Had she possessed anything that day... Anything she could part with—even a broken chip of gold—she would doubtlessly have tried to press it into Anne's hands as recompense.

Therefore, she sympathized with Bel. Resonated with her, even. Yet...

"Money carries the same value for everyone," Bel maintained. "It's easy to use, and they can spend it on whatever they want. It's the best thing I can give to show my thanks."

"Bel..."

"Also, there's no guarantee I'll ever meet them again, so I make sure to repay any kindness I receive on the spot."

And at that, Mia finally recognized the source of Bel's penchant for extreme charity—a deep-seated fear buried in the core of her psyche. Insisting on repaying kindness on the spot was exactly what one would

do...if they didn't believe in their own permanence. It was a preemptive approach, meant to keep her debts of gratitude constantly repaid so if, or maybe *when* she disappeared, she wouldn't leave behind any regrets.

The world Bel had seen... The life she'd lived... It was not one that allowed for the insouciance of "I'll thank them tomorrow." And this very understanding had likely been a costly lesson she'd learned after numerous instances of "If only I'd said it then..."

With this heartbreaking context in mind, Mia couldn't help but groan in frustration. She wanted to lecture Bel about her spending habits, but no combination of words seemed fitting. That left her no choice but to change her approach.

"Even so... I still object to your method of using money to repay everything. I think your belief that money carries the same value to everyone is wrong," Mia insisted. "Not everything can be solved by money."

It was...an incredibly sensible statement. Doubly incredible due to the fact that it was said by Mia. Maybe the moon was blue. Who knows?

"Really? Am I...really wrong?" Bel didn't seem entirely convinced. That didn't surprise Mia. While valid, her statement had no *oomph*, for it was borrowed wisdom. Words that did not come from the heart could not move hearts.

Well, Mia thought with a frown, *she's sure turning out to be a tough nut to crack.*

She popped a sweet snack into her mouth, but to her dismay, no persuasive wisdom emerged in return.

"Let's move on for now, then. Bel, I plan to introduce you to the emperor today."

Lacking a viable way to coax Bel away from her spendthrift tendencies, Mia decided to change the topic.

"Huh? So I'm going to meet my great— I mean, your father?" asked a surprised Bel.

Mia nodded solemnly.

"That's right. You'll be meeting His Imperial Majesty Matthias Luna Tearmoon."

She folded her arms in a pensive pose.

But now that I think about it though...this might be a little difficult.

For all his...*bumbling*, the man was still the sovereign of the great empire of Tearmoon. She couldn't just stroll up and tell him to say hi to his great-granddaughter. That meant Bel would have to, at best, be the daughter of a commoner. At worst, she could end up attracting suspicion.

"I've never heard of father being attacked by assassins, so they probably have strict measures in place to prevent any attempts. I doubt he'd agree to meet with someone whose background is a complete mystery. Ugh, what can I say to trick him...?"

She brooded all the way to his office.

"Excuse me, father. Do you have a moment?"

"Ooooh, Mia! Of course I do! What's the matter?"

Mia's father, being the emperor, was generally a busy man. There was a brief period before mealtime, however, when he often reclined in his office. The reason for this lull in his day was simple. Circumstances permitting, he always tried to dine with Mia. As a result, he scheduled all official business —meetings with the imperial council, reports from the moon ministries, and whatever else he had to do—in such a manner that he'd be done well in advance of his mealtimes. For him, no bliss in the world was greater than enjoying a conversation with his beloved daughter over a meal.

Mia found the experience bothersome at times, but that wasn't important right now. She instructed Bel to wait outside the room and walked in herself.

"What fine and rare fortune is this? You've come without being summoned!" The emperor beamed at her. "Will you be joining me for lunch today?"

"Uhh, well, yes... But more importantly, there's someone I'd like you to meet, father."

"Oh? Someone you'd like me to meet, you say? Might this be that friend of yours that you've been showing around?" the emperor asked with an affectionate smile as he scratched his chin. "I heard she's a young girl who bears more than a passing resemblance to you. I've been meaning to get a look at her myself."

"My, you certainly keep up with the news, don't you?"

Mia was impressed by her father's response.

I wonder if he's keeping tabs on everyone who comes into the Whitemoon Palace... Hm, I never knew father valued information so highly.

Maybe he's not as clueless as he seems.

...Thought the person who, in the previous timeline, was raked over the coals by Ludwig for not knowing the name of even a single dignitary who visited the palace. Thanks to that, she was now well aware of the importance of acquiring information in advance. The visceral trauma of the experience made sure of that.

"Ho ho ho, of course I do. Did you think I'd be so irresponsible as to leave your friend circle uninvestigated? Your classmates, members of the horsemanship club, the student council, even your dorm neighbors—I've researched them all!"

The emperor puffed out his chest like a child who'd just told his parents he'd gotten all his homework done early. Mia's face twitched as she struggled to maintain its civil facade.

"I-I see. Well, uh... Good for you. Anyway, I'd like to introduce her to you. Oh, before that," said Mia as a thought suddenly came to her, "pardon the abruptness, father, but would you happen to have any children I'm not aware of? Illegitimate children, for example?"

It wasn't a particularly clever thought, born more from indolence than wisdom. She just figured that if he did have some spurious offspring, she could just make Bel one of them and be done with it. It wasn't that she was having trouble finding a suitable identity. A girl she picked up from the slums, or the daughter of a foreign noble...there were plenty of ways to pass her off. An illegitimate child was just the easiest solution, since it'd validate the "younger sister" setup she was already using.

Unfortunately...

"Definitely not. That is a physical impossibility."

...Without the slightest hesitation, the emperor shook his head.

"Oh? Why's that? It's not like I'll get mad at you, you know? As emperor, it's only natural for you to be thinking about successors. And if you, you know, had a little fun in your younger days, I can totally understand that too, so..."

"Well, that's very nice of you...but the issue is that I've never known any women other than your mother."

"...Huh?"

She stared agape at her father, who grinned wide at her.

"In a word, *woman* came before *women*. Before I had a chance to

acquaint myself with the wonderful world of skirt-chasing, I'd already fallen head over heels for your mother. It was love at first sight. Now that I think about it, I probably could have fooled around a little more. Bah ha ha ha!"

Uhhh, so how exactly is a girl supposed to respond when her father comes out to her about having no experience with women other than her mother? Laugh? Cry?

As his daughter, Mia wasn't sure how to process this new information about her father's callow and single-minded fascination with her mother. While she was wrestling with her feelings, the emperor stepped out of the room unprompted and looked around.

"Oh ho, so you're the one. Intriguing. There's definitely a good amount of Mia in you," he marveled. "What's that? Your name is Miabel? Moons! Even your name is similar. Ho ho ho. If Mia had a child, I bet she'd look just like you."

The two hit it off immediately. Within seconds, they were happily chatting away.

"Wait, wha— Father! You can't just...*walk up* to her like that!" Mia huffed. "I know she's my friend, but show some caution, please."

Faced with her father's unreserved acceptance of Miabel, Mia couldn't help but feel a hint of concern for his personal safety. The Chaos Serpents weren't the only ones who'd enjoy a good stabbing of the Tearmoon Emperor. Plenty of other assassins shared their interest.

"Caution? What need is there for caution? Mia, you are wonderful. Therefore, anyone who looks like you is wonderful," the emperor said, as if he'd just demonstrated an irrefutable mathematical proof. "The fact that she looks like you is reason enough for me to trust her."

"I-It is?"

"It certainly is. Why wouldn't it be? Yes, you can't judge a book by its cover, and that applies to people as well, but you are not *people*! You are *Mia*! Only the harmonious presence of both inner and outer beauty can produce the absolute jewel that is you!"

He let out a hearty laugh.

You know what? For the first time in my life, I am in awe of father. And also a little terrified. At this rate, I wouldn't be surprised if he's seriously considering building a giant golden statue of me or something...

The emperor might have thrown caution to the wind, but Mia caught it and promptly added it to her attitude toward her father.

Chapter 2: To Wrong Someone through Food Is to Know True Fury

The seasons continued to shift. Mia idled away the winter holidays in her usual fashion, and there were five days left until she had to depart for Saint-Noel. Today, she was receiving a routine report from Ludwig in her room.

“I was just informed by Balthazar that food prices have begun to spike.”

Hearing this piece of news, Mia set the cup of tea she’d just picked up back down on the table.

“Hm... So it’s here at last.” Her voice wanted to quiver. She stopped it from doing so.

The intermittent reports of crop failures throughout the past year had finally come to a head, manifesting as an undeniable harbinger of famine. She’d feared this moment. Planned for it, yes, but also hoped it wouldn’t come to pass. That hope had officially been dashed.

“It’s not yet a problem at this moment,” Ludwig continued, “but in the near future, we’ll likely start to see people going hungry.”

“Hm... And? What’s the plan then?”

He placed a bundle of parchment before her. “First, please take a look at these.”

Distilled onto the pages were the fruits of Ludwig’s tireless effort over the past two years. It presented an extensive amount of data ranging from the provisions they’d stockpiled and estimates of necessary quantities to feed the empire’s subjects to market prices of food currently in circulation, their predicted inflation, and the likelihood of each administrative region to experience starvation. The numbers were also extremely detailed.

Overcoming a famine of this scale wasn’t as simple as doling out their stockpile and calling it a day. That wasn’t nearly enough. They needed to distribute the quantities being imported from abroad, as well as account for local harvests, which were destitute but in no way irrelevant. Only with all

that considered could they begin tackling the problem of how to optimally distribute their reserved provisions.

“Hmm...”

Mia held up the first parchment, making sure to scratch her chin for a good while before moving on to the next. She repeated this pattern for all the other pages. On the outside, she looked like she was carefully scrutinizing each and every data point. On the inside, she wasn’t looking at all.

“I see. Interesting.”

To say she didn’t understand the information would be giving her too much credit. She didn’t even understand what it was that she didn’t understand. It was a classic situation that had befuddled countless students and teachers throughout the ages. She had, in fact, previously gotten many good scoldings from Ludwig for being in this very situation. Could she really be blamed though? After all, to the mathematically challenged, tables of numbers might as well be code written in a foreign language. And Mia was definitely *very* challenged. She and math had never seen eye to eye.

After flipping through the thick stack of parchment, she set it down and with a defeated sigh, said, “I...still have no idea.”

She held up the white flag of honesty and conceded. It was her second best option...or maybe second worst. In any case, it wasn’t the *worst* option. She knew from hard-earned experience that when talking to smart types like Ludwig, the worst thing she could do was pretend to know something when she did not. Asking questions in her state of compound incomprehension would doubtlessly lead to a string of irritated grumbling, which she didn’t appreciate either, but it was better than remaining completely ignorant.

So, she decided to fess up...to which Ludwig replied, “My sincerest apologies. I’m aware that the data is imperfect.”

He lowered his head with a bitter grimace.

“Unfortunately, there is a great deal of uncertainty in the data gathered from the various nobles throughout the empire... We now have a decent picture of the size of their stockpiles, but trying to predict how they’ll use those stockpiles is simply too difficult,” he explained. “Though the presence of so much uncertainty in our estimates of the impact on the populace is certainly not ideal...I do believe we’ll be able to weather this famine with some room to spare.”

“Hm, I see. That’s good news.”

The numbers remained as confounding as ever, but she now knew what they meant. Rather, she knew what Ludwig *said* they meant, which was good enough for her.

“But there’s one thing I’d like to add, Ludwig.” She looked directly at him.

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“Don’t make any enemies in the process of doing this,” she said with a profoundly sage expression, as if she were speaking a cosmic truth.

Mia, you see, knew the terrible cost of wronging someone through food. She considered herself a compassionate, mild-mannered princess. Gentle, merciful, kindhearted... These were traits she often associated with herself. “A lack of self-awareness” was probably another one she should add to the list, but anyway. The point is that she thought of herself as a pretty pleasant person overall. But even an affable individual like herself was powerless before the all-consuming outrage of food woes. If someone dropped her cake on the ground in front of her, she’d throw a fit, and if they then told her that was the last one, she might just turn into fury incarnate.

That’s why she cautioned Ludwig. Wronging a single person through food was bad enough. Wronging an entire populace would be a nightmare.

“If anything, I’d rather you used the food to make friends. As many as possible. All of them, ideally.”

She was speaking from the heart. Learning from her past, it was a sentiment that she’d truly taken to. That, she knew, was the best way to keep the guillotine at bay.

“Please keep this in mind,” she added, growing pedantic out of concern. “Under no circumstances should you allow yourself to forget this point.”

“Understood. I’ll be sure to commit it to memory.”

She smiled contentedly as he bowed.

“Well then. That’s that. I don’t think there’s anything left to do before I head back to Saint-Noel.”

“Not to my knowledge. Please feel free to return at your leisure, Your Highness. This is the travel itinerary the Princess Guard devised for the journey. Do have a look.”

“Hm...”

Mia read over the parchment and pursed her lips.

Ludwig's saying everything's under control here, and the famine hasn't actually started yet...but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't still worried.

The fear of having nothing to eat was a deep and primal one. A dwindling food supply induced profound anxiety. Just thinking about it made Mia's stomach hurt. And it wasn't because she'd just had way too much to eat. Well, it wasn't *entirely* because of that.

If they wanted to allay that fear, they'd need people to trust that next year's harvest would be as good as this year's. Only by believing that their table would be equally loaded tomorrow could people enjoy the food on it today.

If I want to have any peace of mind, we can't just keep digging into our savings. That'd be way too stressful. Of course, we'll be counting on Chloe's dad and Perujin to do their best, but I feel like there's a need for something more. Some sort of...

"...Fundamental solution that'll give me peace of mind."

"Hm? What was that, Your Highness?"

"Huh? Oh, it's nothing. I was just thinking... I'd like to make a detour on the way back to Saint-Noel, so this itinerary will need some changes."

"A detour to where?"

"To Viscount Berman's domain."

"Viscount Berman... You're headed to the academy city then?" asked Ludwig with curiously furrowed brows.

Mia nodded.

"That's right. There's something I'd like to discuss with Arshia."

Chapter 3: The Birth Cry of the Empress Faction —Mia's Hand Moves of Its Own Accord Again—

The day after his meeting with Mia, Ludwig walked into an old house tucked away in a corner of the capital. It was here that a secret gathering was under way. A flame wavered inside, illuminating the faces of eight people. There was a mix of men and women, and they sat loosely around a table engaging in leisurely banter. The figures of Ludwig's collaborators, Balthazar and Gilbert, could be seen among them. That which connected the three men was shared by all the others in the room. Indeed, it was a gathering of the Galvanus cohort.

Some were diplomats from the Jade Moon Ministry, others were capital administration officials from the Azure Moon Ministry, and there were also those from the same Golden Moon Ministry that Ludwig worked in. A particularly eccentric individual was even following one of the central nobility around as a member of their close retinue, mostly for personal amusement. Though the nature of their posts differed, the importance did not. They all held key positions that demanded competence, which they delivered in spades.

"Gotta say, this is news to me. I had no idea those nobles were still alive somewhere out there... They're seriously talented. So much so, frankly, that I thought for sure they'd been offed already."

The current topic of discussion was Duke Yellowmoon's covert maneuvering which, despite the momentousness of the revelation, was discussed with the air of small talk.

"And now they're *coming back*? Truly?" Another member chimed in with a shrug. "I was counting on them to ferry me out of here when the empire inevitably implodes. So much for my escape plan."

His sardonic grin suggested he'd known about Duke Yellowmoon's

maneuvering the whole time. Known...and not told anyone. He'd kept his cards very close to his chest, saving them for a future occasion where they might prove useful—to him and only him.

Make no mistake, these were not middling minds. They were shrewd and capable, unquestionably excellent. But they were also free, relentlessly so, and shunned restraint. They were not and *would not* be bound by the empire. Because they excelled, they could go to any nation and thrive. Consequently, if the empire were to collapse under the weight of its own rot, they'd simply leave. Their old master had lectured them time and again about how there was no need to martyr themselves for the sake of foolish nobles, and they'd taken his teachings to heart. These were not the types to go down with the ship; they'd abandon it at the first sign of a breached hull and jump to another vessel.

But, mused Ludwig, *if I want to make Empress Mia a reality, I'm going to need even more help from people like them. Cooperation from nobles goes without saying, but government officials play a key role in moving a nation forward.*

With Mia steadily pulling various nobles and the young scions of the Four Houses into her orbit, it fell on Ludwig to rally the administrative side of things. He needed to win over his fellow pupils at all costs.

"It's good to see everyone," Ludwig began. All eyes focused on him. "First, let me apologize for asking you to take time out of your busy schedules to gather here."

"No need to apologize, Ludwig. It's not like any of us even considered refusing. Not at a time like this. Right?" said Gilbert, grinning as he glanced around the room. No one objected. "After all, the patron saint of our dear elder pupil just declared her intention to succeed the throne in spectacular fashion. Then, said elder pupil proceeds to blow the 'Team Galv assemble' horn. Honestly, who *wouldn't* show up to something this exciting?"

"I see... Well, that's promising, I suppose."

Ludwig met the gaze of each member in turn, then adjusted his glasses.

"I'll get straight to the point then. I'd like you all to throw your weight behind Her Highness."

"My weight, eh? Well, I've got plenty of that to throw around..." quipped one of the men. He jokingly slapped his stomach before his gaze took on a taunting air. "But is she *worth* it? I was under the impression that

all this empire's lords and ladies and His and Her High and Mightinesses are defined by their ineptitude. Are you telling me Princess Mia is an exception?"

"Absolutely. But feel free to decide for yourself," replied Ludwig as he produced a bundle of parchment. Numerical tabulations filled the pages.

"What are *those* supposed to be?"

"Something I'd like you all to see." His audience waited in silence as Ludwig drew in a long breath. He looked at each of their faces in turn, then resumed in a solemn tone. "This year...will mark the beginning of a great famine."

Long before arriving, he'd decided that he would take advantage of the looming crisis to secure the support of his cohort. The benefits were twofold and synergistic. By demonstrating Mia's prudence in preparing for the plight, he could convince his fellow pupils to support him, and by gaining their support, he'd be able to utilize their talents to fight the famine. As an added bonus, it would also tie them down, preventing them from jumping ship at the first sign of trouble.

How exactly would he bring them on board? Well, being students of Master Galv, this was a collection of intensely curious minds. If he were to preemptively show them a collection of data that suggested the famine was coming, and then declare the famine would be here to stay for three years...what would they think? There was no way any of them could resist the urge to stay and watch how his prophecy unfolded. He *knew* these people, knew how they thought. For former pupils of Master Galv, a proposition of this nature straddled the line between rationality and the occult so perfectly that it was like catnip for the mind.

"A famine, huh? The signs are certainly there—the decrease in wheat yield last year, for example. I also hear that current early-spring reports of crop growth aren't looking too hot either," mumbled one of the members.

"On that note," Balthazar interrupted, "the Scarlet Moon Ministry's not-official-but-might-as-well-be stance is that the empire will see decreased crop yields this year across the board. A likely contributor is the cooler temperatures we've been seeing since last summer."

Another voice followed up on his comment. "The Jade Moon Ministry's position is that the risk of a famine is relatively high. Poor crops are not limited to the empire. The price of imports from neighboring kingdoms is

on the rise. It hasn't reached dire levels yet, but..."

It could be the start of a vicious cycle. Rising food prices led to poor people starving. Soon, some of the starved would begin to die, resulting in a decrease of able-bodied workers. With a labor shortage, the following year's yields would likely continue to decrease.

"That's all very interesting, but what's your point? We can read reports too. I'm pretty sure everyone here already saw this coming," said another member in a slightly sarcastic tone.

"I'm sure you did. But did you see it coming two years ago?" asked Ludwig. "Because that's when Her Highness made her prediction. I have been preparing ever since."

"...Two years ago? You can't be serious."

One of the men, previously leaning back in his chair, shot up and began to pore over the parchments.

"Under Her Highness's leadership," Ludwig continued, "I have spent the past two years improving the empire's financial health while simultaneously increasing food reserves. Furthermore, Her Highness, in accounting for the possibility of crop failures occurring not only within the empire but neighboring kingdoms as well, has established wheat import channels from distant nations."

"Long-distance import of wheat operated through the Forkroads," one man said, mulling over the situation. "And with fixed prices too... Hm..."

"Makes sense," another chimed in. "By paying a premium during ordinary times, she's ensuring affordable supply during crises. A pretty decent idea, honestly. In fact, isn't this a concept that merchant guilds can implement?"

Pensive compliments could be heard throughout the room.

"But could she *really* have predicted this turn of events? Are you claiming that the princess is a prophet? That she has knowledge of the future?"

Ludwig did not immediately respond. He prodded the bridge of his glasses and considered his answer. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to describe Mia's foresight as prophetic. The accuracy of her predictions more than merited the term. He did not, however, believe that supernatural capabilities were involved.

"I...certainly do not understand everything that goes through Her

Highness's mind," Ludwig replied. "However, with respect to your question, I personally believe that her actions are rooted in not divine providence but labor. Hard and relentless mental labor."

"Brainwork, then. You're saying brainwork—that is, extensive amounts of observation and prediction—can ultimately predict the future? A tenable argument, I suppose. When you think about it, famines have patterns too. They occur in cycles. Studying history can give us a rough idea of when they might strike."

"That's not all," added another member. "She probably has a very accurate grasp of the empire's current state. That must have allowed her to see the early warning signs of trouble. Be it famine, trade embargos by foreign nations, or even war... All forms of sudden societal upheaval come with visible red flags."

The conversers nodded at each other and turned to Ludwig.

"I see where you're going with this. The plan is to use this famine to consolidate the masses around her once and for all. Once the famine really starts to spread, you'll show up like knights in shining armor and start doling out food. If the local lords are being stingy, you can oust them as evildoers and build support for yourself amongst the people. Divide and conquer, basically—except you're dividing lords from their people. This is honestly impressive statecraft."

Ludwig shook his head. "You're missing the forest for the trees. What Her Highness is trying to achieve...is something much grander in scope."

And it was then that Mia's metaphorical hand smiled with supreme confidence.

"What do you mean by that?" asked a dubious listener.

"What I mean," said Ludwig, "is that Her Highness gave me a command... And that command is 'don't make any enemies.'"

"'Don't make any enemies'? What the flipping fairybutts is *that* supposed to mean?"

As Ludwig regarded their bewildered faces, he couldn't resist a wry smile. *Ah, it's like looking at my past self. Back when I first met Her Highness, I was just like them, entirely incapable of understanding her true intentions.*

As a matter of fact, when he'd gone to report to Mia, there had been an issue troubling him. He wasn't sure how the food reserves should be

distributed. The stockpiling process itself was fortunately proceeding smoothly. If their goal was simply the subsistence of their people, they already had plenty of wiggle room to work with.

But circumstances had changed. With Mia's "Declaration of Succession" the other day, Ludwig was forced to shift his viewpoint. It was no longer about how to beat the famine; it was about how to *take advantage of* the famine. The simplest method was to oust the nobles who were potential obstacles on Mia's path to the throne. The coming crisis was a golden opportunity to get rid of those harboring ill intent toward a future Empress Mia, as well as root out any incompetent liabilities in their ranks. By pulling the hearts of people away from their local lords and toward Mia, it was highly likely that they could eliminate opposition with ruthless efficiency. That would doubtlessly be a boon for the Empress Mia project.

Something, though...didn't feel right about that approach. It just wasn't how Mia did things. He struggled with this doubt all the way into her room, whereupon she instructed him not to make any enemies. It was vague, more direction than destination, but it was enough. Given the timing and circumstances, she could have only meant...

"Let me ask you all a question," he said, turning toward the room. "You've all read the documents I brought. Was there anything lacking? Some insufficiency to the data? If you were given this and told to carry out the divide and conquer strategy you yourselves described earlier, would you have any difficulty? No? Well, when Her Highness laid her eyes upon this data, she told me that she still had no idea. In other words, the data is insufficient. So what exactly, pray tell, is insufficient here? Any answers?"

The listeners shared confused looks. Ludwig let them converse amongst themselves for some time, then called for attention and met each of their gazes in turn.

"The answer is simple: it does not contain a breakdown of the food reserves in each noble domain."

When Ludwig had presented the parchments to Mia, she'd swiftly flipped through them and said, "I still have no idea." Meanwhile, this room full of young elites, with all their talent and knowhow, had pored over the contents and voiced not a single concern about its adequacy. What, then, had prompted such a statement from the Great Sage of the Empire? What had she deemed lacking? Ludwig knew why; it was a reason that truly

reflected Mia's way of thinking.

"Well, now *I* have no idea," said one of the members in the room. "A breakdown of food reserves by domain? Sure, that'd be nice to have, but what could possibly be worth the ridiculous amount of effort required to get such data?"

The skepticism was valid. In a way, even correct. If the goal was to divide lords from their people, the amount of provisions saved in each domain would indeed be an irrelevant figure. As long as the lord in question didn't actually make use of the stockpile, the plan would work. The point was to create the impression that local nobles wouldn't give any aid, whereas Mia would swiftly swoop in to help. It was the story that mattered —exact numbers were an afterthought.

It was an easy impression to create too, because if the noble in question was a rotten one, they'd abandon the masses regardless of the size of their stores. When it came to food during a famine, their philosophy remained "the more the merrier," even if it cost the lives of their people. This philosophy, for the most part, defined the noble experience.

While it was possible to depose bad actors and put their provisions to better use, there was no guarantee that the provisions weren't already used up. The possibility of forcibly dislodging a lord only to discover his stockpile empty made the entire approach unreliable. There was no need to introduce such inconsistency into the plan. If Mia was truly intent on dividing and conquering, she'd be better off treating the exact quantities in individual stockpiles as trivia instead of data.

But she didn't. She said she still had no idea, meaning the information missing from Ludwig's report was, in fact, critical. What did that suggest? He knew what Mia had done to Viscount Berman, and he knew what she'd done to the young nobles in Saint-Noel Academy who'd affronted Tiona. Armed with this knowledge, it didn't take him long to deduce the answer.

"Why a breakdown of food reserves by domain is necessary, you ask? Simple again. In the process of dealing with this famine, Her Highness intends to drag the nobles in as well."

"Drag the nobles in?" came a confused voice. "What's she trying to do?"

"Nothing complicated," answered Ludwig. "With privilege comes duty. To be a noble is to have noble obligations. She only wishes to see those obligations fulfilled."

Nobles collected taxes from their subjects. In return, they had an obligation to protect their subjects—not only from invaders but also plagues and famine. Though this arrangement was built on moral principles, there was a practical side to it as well. Should a lord fail to provide a healthy standard of living for his people, their ability to do work would fall, resulting in less taxes being generated and eventually a financial crisis for the lord himself. Whether viewed through the lens of idealism or pragmatism, nobles needed to fulfill certain obligations to their subjects.

"In my opinion," explained Ludwig, "Her Highness is trying to make nobles take up the mantle of protecting their people. First, she'll have them fork out all the food they hoarded. If—and only if—it's not enough will she supplement the supply."

That was why she'd told him not to make any enemies. The timing of her instruction was telling. He'd already informed her that they had sufficient food reserves to keep the masses fed. She was therefore advising him on the ensuing question—how to *use* those reserves.

"That sounds like a sketchy plan. I can't imagine all the lords and ladies suddenly becoming good little children and doing the right thing."

Ludwig shook his head at the naysayer. "They won't do so willingly, of course; pressure will surely be applied. Let me put this in simpler terms. So far, Her Highness has always maintained a magnanimous attitude toward the masses, as evidenced by her commissioning of the hospital in the Newmoon District and her recent birthday festival."

As he spoke, it occurred to him in a moment of awe that the birthday festival was very likely a part of the plan. While he was busy getting emotional about her announcement, she'd already begun to maneuver.

"Could someone like her who loves her people so deeply," he continued, "possibly have a favorable view of nobles who would forsake their people to protect their own interests? Absolutely not. She would pressure them. At the same time, she'd give them a way out. If they did everything they could to help their people, when their stockpiles ran low, she'd pick up the slack. It's the carrot to her stick. She's essentially telling them, 'keep your people fed, and I'll keep you fed.'"

In other words, Mia wouldn't directly provide any food to the people. She'd send it through the governing noble of each domain and have them distribute the supply.

“If you think about it from that perspective, you’ll find that the recent birthday festival was, in fact, laying the groundwork for this grand plan. It strengthened the bonds between nobles and commoners while also serving as a practice run for food distribution within their domains.”

By participating in the festival, nobles gained highly relevant knowledge about how many people they ruled over and how much food was needed.

“Having the central government micromanage every aspect of this operation is both labor-intensive and inefficient. It also adds layers of complexity, resulting in obstacles that prevent the smooth flow of food. If food doesn’t flow, people will die. Therefore, it’s better to utilize existing channels preestablished by local rulers.”

The empire’s lands were vast. No single human could oversee its entirety—not even Mia. The circumstances of a farmer in a distant domain was not something she could personally attend to. She could, however, ask that farmer’s lord to do so, for it was his duty. The logic was actually exceedingly simple.

“That way, the rulers will also make a good impression on their subjects. If Her Highness were to wade in by herself and provide aid, it would drive a wedge between them. She’d effectively be breeding animosity, causing people to scorn their rulers.”

Which was, of course, the very objective of the divide and conquer strategy.

“Her Highness does not wish to make enemies of the nobles. If anything, she’s hoping to use this opportunity to rally them to her side.”

“But that’s...not how things are done! It’s unreasonable!” protested one listener.

“True,” answered Ludwig. “The reasonable way would be to wait for an incompetent ruler to fail and fall, then take over and rule the domain properly. It might even be the correct method. More efficient and takes less work.”

This method wasn’t only effective for removing enemies but also unproductive actors. In the process of making Mia empress, it was highly likely that incompetent nobles would also become obstacles. Nevertheless, Ludwig shook his head.

“If the goal is to rule efficiently, then replacing the top is definitely the most logical option. But that’s not *her* way. If a sword is dull and unusable,

her preferred solution is not to throw it away and buy a new one, but to resharpen its blade to retrieve its utility. She does not get rid of useless people; she makes them useful instead. *That* is her way."

Just like how she converted Berman, turning him from fierce opponent to stalwart loyalist.

"But that also gives more power to local rulers," cautioned another voice. "Some of them might have less-than-noble ideas of how to use that power."

What Ludwig was suggesting was the polar opposite of divide and conquer. It called for benevolent rule by local rulers and provided them with the means to do so. They'd enjoy increased political clout and tighter bonds with their people. With this newfound strength, they could very well rally *against* Mia. That was not an impossible scenario...but it was also a scenario that had been accounted for.

"Eh, so what?" argued a third voice. "They've got that covered. Nobody's going to stand against her right now. Not after the stunt she pulled at the palace. She established a firm fellowship with Saint Rafina, Prince Sion of Sunkland, and Prince Abel of Remno. She commands the empire's most elite group of soldiers, the Princess Guard. And the vice captain of the Guard is Duke Redmoon's daughter, giving her significant military sway. Plus, I hear she's on very good terms with Duke Greenmoon's daughter, and has even managed to ingratiate herself with Duke Bluemoon's son by getting him into the student council."

Right now, Mia was no mere princess. The amount of political clout she wielded had grown to such staggering heights that opposing her was, for the most part, no longer feasible. Even if one ruled over the largest domain in the empire, commanded a topnotch private army, and enjoyed fierce loyalty from their people, they'd *still* have to think twice. She'd exerted dominance through that display during the festival, and the nobles in attendance had been duly dominated.

"No way... You're saying it was all calculated?" asked a bewildered member. "That she'd already accounted for all of this beforehand, and on top of that chose to show up in that dress? It was a deliberate power move to get the nobles in line?"

"It is very likely," said Ludwig, "that what we've just discussed forms the basis of Her Highness's vision. Now that we've elucidated her

intentions, I plan to act on them. For the time being, I'd like to ask each of you to use the power of your respective stations to help prepare for the famine. While you do, it is my hope that you will judge for yourselves whether Her Highness is worthy of being crowned empress."

With that, Ludwig quietly bowed.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again. She's one hell of a person, isn't she?" Gilbert sighed before sardonically shaking his head. "Honestly, sometimes, it feels like she can get everything done by herself. I'm not even sure if she needs the help of us mere mortals."

Ludwig shook his head. "No, Her Highness is well aware of how society operates."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You don't understand? Allow me to explain, then. Yes, Her Highness is superbly competent, and she may very well be capable of accomplishing most things by herself. Mental labor especially is something she can usually handle by herself, but she also understands that an empire cannot function on mental labor alone."

"Ah. And that's why she gives people like you and me work?"

"Yes, but that's not the only reason."

"Hm? What else is there?" asked a blinking Gilbert.

"Haven't you heard about the academy city project? Her Highness has a keen interest in nurturing young talent who can become future leaders of the empire. Before returning to Saint-Noel, she plans to take a detour to Princess Town so she can see how the academy city is coming along."

"Oh, that reminds me," a man nearby chimed in. "I heard the master is going to become headmaster at the school. Is that true, Ludwig?"

"It is. In fact, I've already asked a number of his pupils to work as lecturers. Her Highness doesn't care about status or wealth; she intends to offer education to *anyone* who has the potential to make use of it. In essence, she's trying to produce people like us through the formal educational system of an academy."

A round of surprised mumbling erupted in the room. The thought of taking the student-teacher relationships between Galvanus and his students and reproducing them in a systematic fashion had never crossed their minds.

After a period of contemplation, Gilbert grinned like a man who'd just accepted a challenge. "Well, that just lit a fire under our asses, didn't it? We'd better stop resting on our laurels or pretty soon, we're going to get swallowed by an army of little Galvs."

"Each of whom," Ludwig added, "will be our equal in capability...but likely our superior in loyalty."

The room went quiet as layer after layer of implications dawned on the reeling minds in the room. For many, the Great Sage of the Empire had, until recently, been an epithet rooted more in spectacle than fact. At last, they realized that it was by no means hyperbole.

"So..." After a long span, Balthazar, who hadn't yet spoken a word during the meeting, broke the silence. "What should we call ourselves?"

"What, are we turning this into a whole thing?" quipped Gilbert. "Sure, we can do what the Remno revolutionaries did. Pick a color and we'll all wear it. She wore purple to the ball, so maybe we can call ourselves the Purple Scarves."

Ludwig frowned, then slowly shook his head. "No... Her Highness has made her position clear. It follows, then, that we must do the same. We shall be...the Empress Faction."

"The Empress Faction..."

As they spoke the words, a palpable tension descended upon the room.

"The Empress Faction...and Tearmoon's first empress."

"Hah. Now that's something worth working toward. I like it."

In the dim recesses of an old house, the newly-formed Empress Faction rallied around Ludwig and took its first breath.

While Ludwig was busy conspiring in the capital, Mia departed for Viscount Berman's domain. The plan was to take her detour first, then travel through the Sealence Forest and Outcount Rudolvon's domain to reach Belluga. What the plan did *not* include was having to deal with a nuisance of an emperor who kept whining about how she "doesn't have to leave so early" and "could at least let Bel stay a little longer, or even just leave her here." Nevertheless, she dealt with the situation, albeit with no small amount of annoyance.

"Besides, Bel keeps munching on sweets. If I let her stay here any longer, she's going to bloat up..."

It's easy to be concerned about F.A.T. when it's happening to other people. Such is the nature of the phenomenon. So, after prying her grumbling father away from Bel, the two girls set out together.

"Hmm... There's a good bit of distance to Viscount Berman's domain, isn't there?" murmured Mia as her carriage trundled down the road. She was growing increasingly aware of the sheer vastness of the empire's lands. "Sending food from the capital out to all those remote places is going to be a headache. It also means that if a place runs out of food, it's going to take a while for the message to even reach us in the first place."

In that case, going hungry for a couple meals was basically inevitable. She grimaced, feeling a visceral discomfort at the thought.

"An empty stomach is a terrible thing to endure. If only they didn't have to wait for the food to reach them..."

In the previous timeline, Mia had gone on an empire-wide inspection-and-visitation tour, the purpose of which was to survey local conditions and encourage soldiers to remain at their posts. During the trip, she'd seen with her own eyes the misery inflicted by the famine, as well as the anger and hatred of her people. Fury over food is fury well-incensed. In the end, she'd gained an intimate understanding of how hunger robbed people of composure. Points to Ludwig for incorporating hands-on education!

"And Ludwig being Ludwig, he'll probably send an endless amount of detailed reports my way. That's going to give me so much work! I wonder if there's a way to get around this problem..."

In general, the only time Mia didn't slack off was when she was figuring out *how* to slack off.

"The more I think about it, the more I wish everyone was like Outcount Rudolvon and just voluntarily handled things for me. It'd be so much easier that way," she lamented. "Plus, if the food's being sent out from his domain, it'd reach all his neighboring regions faster too. Hm... I think helping local rulers set up their own food distributing channels might be an option. I can get someone to figure out the details later, but the idea seems solid. After all, no one knows a region better than the region's own ruler. It'd be a waste not to take advantage of that. In fact, we *have to* make them work! What makes them think they can just twiddle their thumbs while I do all the heavy lifting?" Mia huffed. "All right, I've decided! I need to push Ludwig to start thinking in this direction..."

And so, through some cosmic miracle, the hearts of the princess and her vassal had become one! Initial motivation notwithstanding, Mia and Ludwig had, of their own separate accords, settled on the same unified goal.

She continued to contemplate the issue, and before she knew it, the emerging sight of Princess Town was demanding her attention.

Little did the newly gathered members of the Empress Faction know...the princess around whom they'd rallied would soon send their jaws to the floor once again. Not even Ludwig, their leader and Mia's loyal autonomous appendage, saw it coming.

Chapter 4: Berman Gains Mia's Trust

Upon arriving at Viscount Berman's domain, Mia received a lavish welcome.

"It is an absolute honor to have Your Highness grace our humble domain. I and my people alike are moved to tears by this joyous occasion," proclaimed the viscount in a statement that sounded like exaggeration but, to Mia's bewilderment, turned out to be anything but.

The enthusiasm with which the townspeople greeted her was, frankly, a bit much.

I have to admit this is a little scary.

Men, women, and children alike swarmed out of their houses and into the streets. A single path was kept open for her carriage, the entire length of which was adorned by a bed of flowers. As the vehicle traveled down the path, chants of "Long live the Great Sage of the Empire!" erupted from all sides. Some of the onlookers even had literal tears streaming down their faces. Mia was a veritable idol here.

Ever since her birthday festival in the winter, Mia's popularity in the empire had reached incredible new heights. Berman's people, partly due to Princess Town being constructed in their viscounty, were especially fond of her, more so than even the emperor himself.

Mia's shock, however, was not shared by Bel who looked, if anything, a bit smug.

"The people of Viscount Berman's domain were known as, uh... I think they were called 'pro-princess hardliners.' They helped me out quite a bit during the civil war," Bel explained.

"Pro-princess hardliners, huh...? I see. That's good, I guess. Also a little creepy."

As someone who'd been subject to all manners of verbal abuse when she'd visited famine-stricken areas in the previous timeline, Mia wasn't used to such effusive displays of approval.

"Not that it's a bad thing. I hope the things I do from now on will allow

me to continue to enjoy welcomes like this," Mia concluded in a pensive tone.

That night, Mia was treated to a grand banquet. Tables groaned under the weight of the mountains of extravagant food piled atop them. She felt her whole body being drawn toward the delectable meals and had to shake herself to escape their spell.

"Thank you for this very generous welcome, Viscount Berman. I have no doubt I'll enjoy myself tonight," she said, trying not to sound *too* eager.

"It is our absolute pleasure, Your Highness."

Berman beamed at her so brightly that she was loath to douse his enthusiasm. Sadly, mission trumped manners, and she resolved to be the rain to his parade.

"However," said Mia, "I must ask that from now on, you refrain from wasting any food."

"I... Huh?" Berman stared agape, incomprehension clear on his face. Mia tried her best to speak in a calm, nonconfrontational voice.

"Listen, just between the two of us," Mia quietly continued, "there's a very good chance that various parts of the empire will start seeing food shortages this summer. I'd like you to prepare for this eventuality by being more frugal with your food."

In truth, Mia didn't expect Berman to cooperate willingly. Considering his personality, vehement opposition was the more likely response.

Still, I have to tell him, or I'll feel bad. Oh, also...

She promptly voiced an additional request.

"And don't go around telling everyone, all right? Only a select few know about this, and I'd like to keep it that way."

The confidentiality of the matter seemed a point worth reinforcing. Berman wasn't exactly known for his taciturnity. This was the man who'd once picked a very public fight with Outcount Rudolvon over the size of their domains. There was a good chance he'd flaunt the information he'd just gained for ego-stroking purposes, and that would be problematic.

"Only a select few..." murmured Berman.

"That's right. And they're a few that I personally selected. After all, the future is normally something that nobody can predict. If word spreads, people might start getting weird ideas."

She gave him a stern look, silently implying, "And those weird ideas

will apply to you too! So if you don't want people thinking you joined a cult, then just keep your mouth shut and start saving food!"

All right, that should keep him from blabbing to everyone about it. I don't know if he'll actually believe me and reduce wastage, but whatever...

With her attention turned inwards, Mia failed to hear the soft, trembling murmur that escaped Berman's lips. "Which means...I'm one of the few that you trust with this information..."

"Oh, by the way, I'm counting on you for Princess Town," she added as the thought occurred to her. "We can't let the children go hungry."

Berman, to her surprise, nodded with a sober expression. "Absolutely, Your Highness. That goes without saying. I will give my life before I allow Princess Town to come to any harm."

Mia shook her head at his extreme devotion. "I appreciate the sentiment, Viscount Berman, but if anything happens, I'd much rather you let me know instead of attempting any noble sacrifices on your own. Ludwig is always in the capital, so feel free to contact him whenever necessary."

Knowing he was willing to give his life was nice, but frankly, she'd be much happier if he just updated her as soon as possible on every development. The earlier she knew about a problem, the easier it would likely be to solve. That was a fact of life. If he tried too hard to be a martyr, he might end up bungling something badly—beyond repair, even. That was the last thing she needed.

The way she saw it, if you don't understand something, never pretend you do. You need to tell people you don't understand at the earliest opportunity!

Then again, from here, it seems faster to ask Outcount Rudolvon for help instead of going all the way to the capital. Though, considering their past woes, I can't imagine Berman being too eager to do that. Hmm...

"Your Highness?" Berman's voice interrupted her silent pensiveness.

"Hm? Oh, it's nothing. Anyway, let's enjoy some of this food."

Needless extravagance was certainly a problem, but Mia wasn't about to decline a mouth-watering feast that was sitting right in front of her. She had to uphold her identity as the gourmand princess. Principles could come later.

"By the way," she added, "tomorrow, I'll be going on our scheduled inspection of the academy. I'm looking forward to speaking with

Headmaster Galv. Oh, and Princess Arshia as well. I wonder how she's doing as a lecturer..."

"Understood. I've already arranged for a carriage and guards. All that remains is for Your Highness to enjoy a relaxing evening at my humble abode," said Berman with a deferential bow. "I thank you for trusting me with this remarkable secret. I have nothing but the deepest gratitude and will make every effort to meet your expectations."

"I have no doubt you will," replied Mia offhandedly. Her attention had already shifted elsewhere. There was a pot of stew on the table, and it was filled to the brim with mushrooms. It looked delicious. *Mushrooms! Mushrooms in stew! Someone here* definitely *knows what they're doing. Not bad, Berman! Not bad at all!*

Mia's trust in Berman rose by one hundred points! She gained a class specialization! Her identity was now "Gourmand Princess: Type Mushroom."

The following day, Mia departed the Berman manor at dawn. Being both an early sleeper and an early riser, Mia was in fact quite the morning person. When she didn't decide to indulge in a morning nap or two, that is.

Accompanied by a company of guards, her carriage made its way toward Princess Town, which sat at the edge of the Sealence Forest. After a period of trundling, a line of trees came into view.

"Aaah, it's been a while since I last came here. Moons, this place looks different, doesn't it? I barely recognize it," she said with audible surprise.

A sizable building stood before the forest. It paled in comparison to the Whitemoon Palace, of course. Even Saint-Noel's main building was bigger. It did, however, give the average noble manor a run for its money. Surrounding the building were vast fields used for farming. The path they took toward the campus was flanked by these fields, making it feel like she was commuting to school through farmland.

"Those weren't here last time, were they? Are they being used for agricultural experiments?"

Despite the lingering cold in the air, the fields were filled with greenery.

"Those don't look like weeds; they're growing in neat lines. Someone must be tending to them. I wonder if that little house over there is an observation cabin or something... My, this is all very impressive."

The primary objective of this academy was, after all, the development of a wheat strain that could survive the cold. Seeing that steady progress was being made on this front, Mia couldn't help but beam with satisfaction. Just then...

"Wow, is that Saint Mia Academy?" Bel hugged the carriage window and squealed with excitement. The sound pulled Mia out of her thoughts.

"Saint Mia Academy... Right, that's what it was called..."

She still wasn't entirely okay with the name, but it was far too late for Mia to be making a fuss. *Whatever. I'll let it slide. It's just a name, after all...*

Unfortunately, her acceptance of the academy's branding would prove fleeting...

As Mia's carriage neared the school building, she discovered that a number of houses had been built in a rough circle around it—the beginnings of a small settlement. They were still too few in number to function as a town, but that didn't bother her. Her top priority was wheat research. As long as that was progressing, all was well.

Eventually, the carriage stopped in front of the school. Mia stepped out and regarded the building before her. Immediately, she noticed something out of the corner of her eye that gave her a bad feeling. There was a strange shed-like structure at the front of the school. It had a roof and walls on only three sides. The last side was wide open. The odd design precluded any form of human residence. It looked more like a shelter from the elements. Or maybe...an insulated shrine.

As she directed her gaze toward the structure, it became clear that something was indeed enshrined within, something whitish. It looked like a statue. The moment she noticed, Mia immediately looked away. At this point, she was in full "please don't let that be what I think it is" mode. Chills were racing up and down her spine. She *really* didn't want to look at it again, lest her fears be confirmed...but she had to. There was no avoiding it. So, with extreme reluctance, she laid her eyes upon the enshrined object.

"Gah! What in the—"

She stared dumbfounded at an iridescent sculpture twice her height. She had to crane her neck back to see the top, whereupon a horn protruded from an equine head. A hand lay upon the unicorn's neck, belonging to a young

girl with a radiant smile. The girl's visage bore more than a passing resemblance to Mia.

Huuuh, that girl seems sort of familiar... Fascinating. I wonder if— Ack! No, I need to accept reality! That's definitely me! She was reminded of what her father had said during her birthday festival. *He definitely mentioned how Viscount Berman was building some sort of statue. So this is the scene of the crime, then...*

The massive snow sculpture from the festival would melt once the weather got warmer, but *this* wouldn't disappear so easily. She didn't know how long wooden sculptures remained discernible, but it was probably years at the very least.

Viscount Berman didn't say a thing about this... Was it meant to be a surprise? I definitely don't need a surprise like this!

The Mia in the sculpture wore a one-piece garment that resembled the dress of woodland fairies. Actually, she didn't just resemble a fairy. She *was* a fairy! There were literal wings coming out of her back!

Th-This is taking things a step too far, isn't it? We're totally in the realm of fiction now. It's honestly sort of embarrassing.

History has never wanted for powerful people who saw themselves as gods. Their desire to be portrayed as omnipotent deities was undoubtedly egotistical, but it was nevertheless an understandable urge. Those who portrayed themselves as adorable fairies, however, were far rarer. This, too, was understandable. After all, it was straight up *embarrassing*. Cringe-worthy, even, and the wide-eyed "look at me, I'm so innocent and charming" smile on her winged counterpart's face made it that much worse.

Then, there was the kicker: everyone who saw this sculpture would naturally assume she'd commissioned it, and therefore had specifically requested to be depicted in this fashion. Her insides all but twisted around themselves at the thought. She began to tremble.

"What do you think, Your Highness? Do you like it?"

A calm voice stopped Mia from descending further into cringe-induced madness. She turned to find the headmaster of Saint Mia Academy approaching.

"Ah, Wiseman Galv. Good to see you." She greeted him with a gracious curtsy. "Thank you for all your help in setting up this academy."

"No, no, the gratitude flows in reverse. I must thank *you* for giving this

old sack of bones an opportunity to feel alive again. It is a great honor to be involved in such a meaningful project."

Mia then introduced the headmaster to Bel before gazing again at the sculpture.

"I must say though, this sculpture..."

"It was made by the Lulus," explained Galv, "as a symbol of their loyalty toward Your Highness. Beautiful, isn't it?"

She nodded. The old man was right. Implications to her image aside, the artistic merit of the sculpture was undeniable. One could feel the sheer passion of the creators in every curve and groove. Whoever carved this must have deeply admired Mia...or really loved fairies.

"Originally, it was supposed to be three times the current size," said Galv, "but I dissuaded them from that idea by explaining to them that Your Highness is not fond of ostentatious displays of self-praise and would not appreciate such a large sculpture."

Oh thank the moons, this guy gets it! No wonder they call him a wise man. Good going, Galv!

"So, I told them to keep it to twice your actual size."

So close! Augh, you were so close! Why didn't you just tell them not to build the thing in the first place?! Mia barely managed to hold back a scream. The fact that he'd *almost* made the perfect call made it that much more maddening.

"There was also the opinion that the sculpture should be made to your exact likeness, but it was eventually decided that some artistic liberty to obfuscate the identity of the girl in the sculpture would best serve our interests. We then added some elements of fantasy to reflect your literary preferences."

Okay, I don't know if we have different definitions of the word "obfuscation," but it is not *hard to tell that's me in the sculpture. The academy is* named after me*, for crying out— Wait, for the love of the moon, there's a plaque at the bottom! And it says "The Frolicking of Saint Mia and a Unicorn"!*

So much for artistic liberty. There was definitely no obfuscation going on here whatsoever.

Ugh, I wonder if I can get this removed somehow...

It was clear from the sculpture's rainbow-colored glitter that it shared an

origin with the unicorn hairpin. Both were made from the trees of this forest whose wood, when debarked, exuded a simple, grounded beauty.

Galv, noticing the way she scrutinized the sculpture, said, “They carved it from an ancient tree that grew deep in the forest. It was likely centuries old. A priceless treasure, undoubtedly, especially considering the Lulus’ belief that trees are gifts from heaven. Nevertheless, they said they would be more than happy to provide us with the wood if it would be used for a sculpture of Your Highness.”

Hnnngh... I-It’s certainly true that the Lulus care a lot about the trees in their forest. I merely kicked one, and they almost put a bunch of holes in me for it. If that’s how they react to normal trees, then one that’s hundreds of years old... Gah, the sheer amount of goodwill! It’s too much!

“Once the Lulus carved the wood to shape,” Galv continued, “Viscount Berman arranged for its surface to be treated using the empire’s most advanced woodworking technology. This sculpture is truly an inspiring symbol of two parties overcoming past differences and uniting under their shared loyalty toward Your Highness.”

Augh! The backstory is too heartwarming! Why is there so much significance to this damn sculpture?! How am I supposed to ask for its removal now?!

It was becoming painfully apparent to Mia that this sculpture was here to stay. She closed her eyes and took a slow breath.

“W-Wow,” she said in the stiff monotone of an unengaged actor, “that is so wonderful. It is such an honor to be the model for a sculpture like this. I am so happy I could cry.”

And she almost did, but for the sake of propriety, she swallowed her tears of happiness.

Though her mental state had been reduced to shavings by the sight of her proud wooden effigy, Mia regathered herself as she entered the school building. Inside, a group of children had arranged themselves in lines to greet her. In the front row were a number of familiar faces.

“My, you’re...”

“It’s a pleasure...to see you again...Your Highness!”

“Wagul? Is that you? Moons, it’s been a while.”

The first to speak was the Lulu chieftain’s grandson. With his neatly

trimmed hair and uniform, she almost didn't recognize him.

"Have you been well?" she asked with a smile.

"Yes, I've been well... But schoolwork is a little tough..."

Ah, of course. I know what you mean, Wagul.

She smiled gently, feeling a profound sympathy for the boy. Schoolwork was pain. Necessary pain perhaps, but still pain. No one in their right mind would do it willing—

"And for me, I've kept up with all *my* studies as promised," said the girl beside Wagul. "Thank you very much for giving me the chance to spend so much time in school."

Mia's smile began to twitch as she turned toward the prodigy of the orphanage, who greeted her with a deep bow. "Ah. That's, uh, good to hear. I'm glad you're working hard, Selia," she replied as a sheen of cold sweat developed on the back of her neck.

This was, after all, the girl she'd vindictively enrolled in the academy by the principle of "if I'm going down, then you're going down with me, buddy." She'd even rubbed salt in the wound by assigning Selia to a special class that would receive Galv's personal and rigorous instruction. And yet she'd completely forgotten all of this until this very moment.

She regarded the girl, wondering if her comment had been sarcastic. Unfortunately, she couldn't tell, so she opted for a cautious smile.

"But, uh... Do you feel okay, overall? Is anything stressing you out?" she asked, feeling a little guilty for sentencing the girl to Galv's intensive educational torture. Back when she'd been a pupil, Ludwig the teacher had been bad enough. The teacher of Ludwig the teacher could only be worse. "If you ever feel like, you know, it's all becoming a little much, then let me know, okay? I'll do something about it."

Mia was no stranger to the concept of reaping what you sow. Figuring she'd sowed a pretty mean seed here, she offered Selia a way out as a means of covering her own behind. By being *extra* nice, she was hoping to keep Selia from swinging the scythe of reprisal. The brave would simply accept the consequences of one's actions, but Mia was a coward, so she was going to do whatever she could to attack Selia's conscience and avoid said consequences.

And then Selia promptly teared up.

Eek! Wh-Why is she crying? Are Galv's lessons that *bad? Or does she*

hate me so much that it's bringing her to tears?!

Just as panic began to set in...

"Thank you, Your Highness...but I'm fine. The teachers here are really nice to me, and I get to learn so much... It's like a dream. I mean it," Selia said, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye before smiling once more.

"I-Is that so? Well, uh... Keep it up, then. But don't hesitate to tell me if you feel like there's too much on your plate, okay?"

Then, Mia turned to another boy.

"And... Greetings, Cyril. It's a pleasure to see you again," she said with as much courtesy as she could muster. Her expression all but blossomed. It was fake blossoming, of course, but Cyril played a key role in her plan, so she was bringing her A-game. The successful development of the new wheat strain could very well hinge on his whims. She needed to keep him happy and motivated.

"It's a pleasure to see you too, Your Highness." Cyril bowed. The motion was perfectly respectful, but she couldn't help but notice some stiffness.

"Hm? Is something the matter?"

"...No. Nothing at all."

His words were at odds with the pout of his lips. Mia frowned in confusion, but Selia promptly leaned over and whispered in a voice that wasn't particularly soft.

"Apparently, he feels like you're very friendly with me and Wagul, but you're always very formal with him, and he's jealous about it."

"S-Selia! That's none of your business!" exclaimed a flustered Cyril.

He tried to pull her away from Mia, only for the motion to expose his flushed cheeks.

My! How terribly adorable!

The subtle emotional turbulence of his puerile soul strummed a rapturous chord across her heartstrings. She *loved* this kind of thing. Mia, at a technical twenty-two years of age, was super into young boys and their insecurities. Now, one should never judge another on their tastes and predilections, but Mia could probably afford to recalibrate her preferred age-range up a tad.

Huh, I remember Abel saying something like that a long time ago too. I guess boys really are all the same!

A fond smile crept across her lips, and she giggled a little. “Looks like someone feels a little left out, doesn’t he?” she said, trading her usual courtesy for affability. “Let’s fix that.”

“Huh?”

She patted a gaping Cyril on the head and gave his hair a good rub. “I was worried you’d feel lonely here, you know? Or get sick. I’m glad you’re healthy. And that you seem to have made a very good friend who pays attention to you,” she said, nodding toward Selia.

Cyril’s cheeks deepened in hue.

“Th-Thank you for your concern, Your Highness.”

He averted his gaze downward. The innocent gesture delighted Mia.

Oho ho, if a pat on the head is all it takes to cheer him up, then I’ll do it all day. I need him in top-form, after all, or we’ll never get our new wheat strain. I’m counting on you, boy. She smiled, entertaining thoughts that were decidedly less innocent.

Then, she looked past them toward the rest of the children.

“And who are the children behind you?”

There were about a dozen of them, all of whom tensed when they caught Mia’s gaze.

“Most of them were enrolled on a recommendation from the priest in the Newmoon District,” Galv explained. “A few from Outcount Rudolvon, and a couple more from other outland nobles nearby. Unfortunately, with many of our facilities still under construction and anti-agriculturalist beliefs circulating through their ranks, not a single child from the central nobility has applied.”

Mia arched an eyebrow, then shrugged. “Is that so? Forget about them, then. If they don’t want to come, then they won’t come.” She honestly couldn’t care less. The primary purpose of this academy was to facilitate Cyril Rudolvon’s development of cold-resistant wheat. She didn’t want a bunch of stuck-up noble children prancing around. At best, they’d be useless; at worst, they’d be an active distraction. Then, deciding that her statement was too dismissive, she qualified it with an additional remark. “Besides, once the academy makes a name for itself from its high standard of education, people will start flocking to it naturally.”

The purpose of this remark was twofold. Firstly, it was flattery directed at Galv; any success on the educational front would obviously be his doing.

At the same time, it was also dissociating herself from the academy's performance, allowing her to avoid taking any responsibility if the project happened to flop.

The reasoning went as follows.

Clause: if the academy performed well and became famous, people would flock to it.

Corollary: if people didn't flock to it, it was because the academy didn't perform well.

Conclusion: people not flocking to the academy was by no means her fault.

Just as she began to secretly gloat over her skillful—and entirely selfish—execution of defensive logicking, a woman approached her.

"Greetings, Princess Mia. Thank you for coming all this way to see us."

"Ah, greetings to you too, Princess Arshia," said Mia before promptly doing a double take at Arshia's attire.

"Yes, I know. I apologize for my appearance." Arshia grimaced as she looked down at her own clothes. They were made of a thickly-layered, cheap-looking fabric that resembled the kind commoners usually wore. "They're work clothes. Perujin farmers always wear things like these. I can't head to the fields in a dress, after all..."

"My, how fascinating. Can I...touch it? Hm... I see. Presentation aside, this is some pretty good fabric. It feels nice and durable. The next time I go mushroom hunting, I should look into getting some..."

Mia's inquisitive mind was constantly on the lookout for new and interesting information. When it was relevant to her mushroom addiction, anyway.

Chapter 5: Cowards Win through Sheer Numbers

"This is some really impressive work for such a short time," said Mia.

Accompanied by Arshia and Cyril, Mia headed out to take a look at the surrounding fields that had recently been tilled for farming. But not before requesting a set of the same work clothes as Arshia and changing into them. When it came to her own protection, Mia spared no expense.

Hmm... It feels a little stuffy in these, but I guess that's part of the package. They certainly look like they can stand some wear and tear. Honestly, it's probably better to wear these when going into the forest...

While privately assessing the quality of her attire, she scanned the fields.

"The land in Tearmoon has always been suited to farming," Arshia stated, "so it only took a little bit of work to get the soil ready for use. Headmaster Galv also managed to convince some of the Lulus to give us a hand."

"Oh? The Lulus? That's very nice of them. I suppose I'll have to figure out a way to thank them somehow..." said Mia as she put a contemplative finger to her chin.

Cyril smiled at her. "I don't think you have to worry about that. The Lulus are a hunting tribe that lives off the forest, but recently, with my family's help, they've started making use of the fields. Interest in farming is growing among the tribe members, so they're starting to place a great deal of hope in Wagul."

"I see. Well, if that's the case, then..."

Geographically, Saint Mia Academy was in close proximity to the Lulus' village, so it was important for the tribe to be supportive of the project.

After going on a narrated tour of the fields, Mia was deeply pleased by their beauty. The land was well-tilled, and plots were neatly arranged. There was also a *lot* of it. The care that had gone into their cultivation was readily apparent.

She grew increasingly confident as she took in the impressive sight. *Look at all these fields! There are so many! With this much farmland, we'll have no problem dealing with the famine!*

"So, how's the cold-resistant wheat research coming along?" she asked Arshia. "Have you had any breakthroughs recently?"

Arshia tensed at the question. "We don't really know yet. Last fall, we looked into a lot of possible options and planted a number of seed types that had potential, but we'll have to wait until they can be harvested to know for sure, and that won't be until a little later. We're still researching in the meantime, looking through literature and such, but..."

"I see. Well, no surprises there, I suppose. That's how farming works, after all."

Wheat took a good deal of time to grow. Mia was certainly aware of this fact. She just hadn't until this moment fully considered the implications.

Hold on a second. Does this mean that if there's a single failed attempt, we'll all be in serious trouble?!

Her concern, though belated, was valid. Research relied on trial and error, but when it came to farming, trial attempts were extremely limited. Each attempt had to proceed through the necessary seasons, and there was only one cycle of seasons a year. Her inner chicken immediately began to stir. Suddenly, the vast stretches of farmland that had until then seemed almost excessive...now felt worryingly inadequate.

If we can only run one trial a year, we'll need more land. Much more. So we can test more each time!

That was the coward in her talking. Said coward's understanding of the situation was also...completely correct! They only had *one* shot at this. No retries, no excuses. In other words, it was similar to taking an exam at Saint-Noel.

Which means our approach should be the same.

Mia, proud princess of Tearmoon, approached tests in a fashion that reflected the enormous size and capacity of her empire—overwhelming the foe through sheer numbers. Sheer number of answers memorized, in this case. Before each exam, she'd commit the entire scope of testable material to memory. That way she'd be ready for whatever the exam threw at her. It was an invincible test-taking tactic!

The same concept can surely be applied to developing new wheat

strains.

If they only had one chance to get it right, they had to cram as many experiments into it as possible. Breadth was the name of the game. If there were a hundred cakes and only a single cake was delicious, how would you find the delicious one? Mia's answer: eat all of them!

She would win through sheer numbers.

We'll need an even larger area of land for that. This isn't nearly enough. I need to look for people who can help... Outcount Rudolvon for sure. Then, hm... The central nobility will almost certainly refuse. Who else can I ask— Ah!

A scene from her summer vacation flashed across her mind. She'd been on her way back from Ganudos when she'd briefly stopped there.

"Yes, maybe I can ask him for help. Outcount Gilden..."

She pursed her lips. The geographical opposite of Outcount Rudolvon's domain, Outcount Gilden's lay on the northern fringe of the empire. Unlike the central nobility, he might readily agree to lending her his farmland.

"Hm? Is something the matter?" asked Arshia. She frowned at Mia, who'd been muttering under her breath.

"Huh? Oh, I was just thinking that I might know someone who could help us with our wheat problem. There's an Outcount Gilden whose domain is up north..."

Admittedly, they could probably develop cold-resistant wheat if they spent a couple of years experimenting on the academy's fields, but Mia didn't want to wait. Every unsuccessful year would eat away at their stockpile, as well as her sanity.

Ludwig did say we should be fine, but still...

In general, Mia believed everything Ludwig told her, but the thought of a steadily diminishing food supply evoked visions of a steadily approaching guillotine. If she had to be reminded of that every day...

I don't need to be a prophet to know I definitely don't want to be in a situation like that. It's way too stressful!

She needed cold-resistant wheat. To feed the empire, yes, but also to make sure she didn't lose her mind. It was therefore imperative that she secured more land to conduct more expansive experiments.

With that said, I have no idea how the experiments are actually done, so I should probably have them go there directly and take a look at the land for

themselves.

With her mind made up, she nodded to herself and said, “It’s a place with some good farmland. I’d appreciate it if you could go there and take a look.”

That was how Arshia Tafrif Perujin and Cyril Rudolvon beheld for the first time a host of agricultural techniques alien to their experience in the southern warmth, invented and refined by the people who farmed the harsh lands of the frigid north.

Side Chapter: Why Is That Flower...

Cyril Rudolvon was a young boy who loved plants.

Why is this flower red?
Why does this one become fuzzy when it spreads seeds?
Why is this grass tall, and that one short?

He loved dwelling on questions like these while gazing idly at the grasses, trees, and flowers around him. He loved reading books and learning about rare plants he'd never seen before. The world was filled with strange and wonderful plants. There were flowers that bloomed in the morning. Flowers that bloomed in the evening. Grasses that caught bugs by themselves. Trees as tall as castles. His curiosity was endlessly whetted by the floral wonders of distant lands.

Over time, his interest in plants evolved from conceptual to experiential. Whereas he used to be content simply reading about them, he now had a keen desire to grow them himself. To feel their unique traits through his own senses.

He had no way of obtaining the more exotic plants, but that was no matter. Marvels and wonders existed everywhere; he could find them in his own backyard. Every individual flower was unique, even if they were the same species, and he loved discovering each and every difference. Soon, growing the flowers that he was fond of in his own garden became a favorite pastime of his.

As the son of a noble, he was expected to conduct himself in an appropriately noble manner. Swordsmanship, horsemanship, leadership... These were all traits he needed to acquire. They weighed heavily on him, inducing no small amount of stress. Fortunately, gardening was not a rare hobby among nobles. In addition, the Rudolvons were a family with a long history of agriculture. Given these circumstances, he figured he could afford to continue dabbling in horticulture, at least as a hobby.

Little did he know...a meeting with the Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, would change his life forever.

Rattle rattle... Rattle rattle...

The carriage bounced up and down as it made its way down the road. Here in the outlands of the empire, roads were crude constructions that often fell into disrepair, and the same rural scenery extended as far as the eye could see.

Accompanied by Arshia, Cyril was in the middle of a northward journey that would take them to the domain of Outcount Gilden. It was the beginning of summer, and wheat-harvesting season was upon the empire. What had begun as a trickle of troubling reports was steadily growing into a flood of worry.

"Cyril, how's the yield in the Rudolvon lands?"

Arshia's question was met with a grim response. "I heard it's not good. Worse than last year, apparently."

"I see... It's the same in Perujin. And the cause..." Arshia gazed up at the sky with narrowed eyes. "Is probably up there. The sun wasn't as generous with its blessing."

"The sun..."

Cyril followed her gaze upward, where a blinding orb of light hung as usual, spilling endless radiance down onto the land. Its light didn't *feel* any cooler. And yet...

"Cold-resistant wheat..."

The sun had been stingy with its blessing. In more practical terms, that meant temperatures had been lower. This year was shaping up to be a cool one, just like the last. Crop yields would inevitably suffer.

"Princess Mia saw this coming. That must be why she sent us here," Arshia whispered, eliciting a nod from Cyril.

Saint Mia Academy offered a variety of courses. Cyril had chosen to apprentice himself to Arshia, focusing on botany. In the process, he'd learned a great deal about Perujin agricultural techniques, many of which were leaps and bounds more advanced than Tearmoon's practices. Years and years of diligent research and refinement had given birth to a technique known as "selective breeding," through which various qualities of a crop could be, well, selectively improved. The shock he'd felt when seeing the

sheer variety of wheat they'd managed to produce, each suited for a different purpose, was not something he'd soon forget. Even so...

"None of them worked. Perujin didn't have a single strain of wheat that could grow well in the cold," lamented Arshia.

Using the fields around the academy, she'd experimented with a number of strains, and the results were less than impressive. The wheat that grew was frail, bending easily to the wind. Ears were gaunt and unfilled. Kernels, often hollow. These were known symptoms of years when the sun's blessing was lacking. Compared to last year, they were increasing in severity. From a distance, the fields around the academy looked the same as any other year's farmland, filled with rows and rows of stalks. The discerning eye, however, knew them to be empty husks—withering remains of wheat, dead but not yet fallen. It was, frankly, rather morbid.

"But that's to be expected, right?" said Cyril, trying to cheer Arshia up. "I mean, who's ever heard of wheat that grows in the cold?"

Given the recent trends in weather, Mia's obsession with cold-resistant wheat was understandable. Necessary, even. Necessity, however, did not breed inevitability. He'd been researching with Arshia this whole time, and he still didn't even know if such a thing existed, never mind how to find it *quickly*.

No living creature could escape death. No fish could live on land. No human could live without eating. Just like these unchanging axioms, perhaps no wheat could grow healthily without ample blessing from the sun. Some things were just constants of the universe, immutable to human will.

Despite his encouraging words, Cyril felt like he was walking in darkness. There was no beacon, no sign to show him the way. Lost and wandering, he had no sense of direction at all. What was his goal? Was it even reachable? Or would the encroaching gloom and his mounting anxiety forever be the whole of his world?

"Does cold-resistant wheat...really exist?" he whispered helplessly.

Arshia looked at him. To his surprise, she wore a reassuring smile.

"I know you feel lost, Cyril, but I want you to remember something. We have a hard problem to solve, but what's important is that we *know what it is*. The problem itself will guide our way."

"What do you mean?"

“Once we identify the problem, we can start figuring out how to solve it. In the process, we’ll refine our techniques. That’s how the Perujin people improved their agricultural techniques, and it’s how we’ll move forward as well,” said Arshia before her tone grew reflective. “I...almost gave up. I almost stopped moving forward. But then I met Princess Mia, and she reminded me of the dream I’d long forgotten. My dream...of a world in which no one goes hungry. And to push me forward, she entrusted me with this task. Completing it will be my first step toward realizing my dream. That’s why I won’t ever give up. Never. Because it’s my dream.”

Cyril stared speechlessly at Arshia, losing himself in the coruscant resolve that glowed in her normally placid eyes. It felt like the staunch faith of a monk in search of truth, or perhaps the steadfast purpose of a knight riding to battle.

“Ms. Arshia...” Just as he mouthed her name, the road crested a hill to reveal a vast expanse of farmland on either side. “Is that Outcount Gilden’s domain?” he asked.

“It’s just like she said; these fields are enormous. Let’s go take a look.”

Arshia stopped the carriage and got off. Cyril hastily followed her as she walked into the fields.

“It looks like they’re in the same situation. By and large, the crops are sickly and undersized,” she said, sighing as her gaze grew distant. “It must be because the sun’s blessing has been lacking here too...”

Cyril looked worryingly at the plants as well. On a whim, he touched a nearby ear of wheat...only to frown.

“Hm? The kernels...are growing fine. How come?”

A voice echoed in his mind. It was his own.

Why is this grass tall, and that one short?

His curiosity flared. Why was this wheat so short? Why did it look sickly but was still producing grains?

“Do shorter ones grow better in the cold? No, wait...”

He continued to stare at it, his eyes wide and unblinking. Noticing that he’d completely stopped moving, Arshia walked over.

“Cyril? What’s the matter? Did you find something on that stalk of wheat?”

“Ms. Arshia, I don’t think...this is the same wheat we grow in Tearmoon. It’s a different species.”

"...What?"

At a glance, the wheat here looked the same, only of ill health. There were almost no discernible differences in appearance. Had the other wheats across the empire grown well, these unshapely specimens would surely have been dismissed as a bad crop. But there *were* differences, and Cyril's eyes, trained by years of habitual observation, did not miss them. These were not the same type of wheat planted by the Rudolvons, nor did they look like any of the Perujin strains. He was sure of it.

"Could this be the strain of wheat that Her Highness wanted us to find? Is that why she sent us to a cold place like this?"

Flowers were red because being red was advantageous in their habitat.

Trees were tall because they received more of the sun's blessing.

And this wheat was resistant to cold...because it *grew in cold places*.

Living things adapted their physical properties to the environment in which they grew. By that logic...

"I-It's so obvious... I can't believe I didn't think of it until now. If we want cold-resistant wheat, we have to look for wheat that's already growing in cold places."

Both Perujin and the Rudolvon domain were blessed with favorable soil and climate for agriculture. *Of course* they hadn't heard of wheats that could endure chilly temperatures and send roots deep into cold soil. They never needed to consider such things.

Cyril quietly trembled as he reached this conclusion. He...might be of use to Mia after all. The idle knowledge he'd accumulated from his profuse reading—a mere curiosity-satiating hobby that no one but his sister had ever deemed worthwhile—was somehow...coming in handy?

"So that's why Her Highness..." he whispered in sudden understanding. "She thought it would be worthwhile. She'd thought so from the very start. That's why she sent me here. She was showing me a way to put what I know to good use."

He was reminded of the time she saw one of the flowers he'd grown and praised him. Through that flower, she'd seen his potential, and now, she was giving him a chance to shine.

A beam of light pierced through the darkness, illuminating the path at his feet. It led forward. Surely, there was only one thing left to do—walk it.

"Ms. Arshia, let's get some samples of this wheat." When he spoke those

words, his eyes glowed with the same coruscant resolve as his Perujin mentor.

Chapter 6: Princess Mia...Resolves to Play the Gracious Host!

Let us backtrack a little.

After departing Saint Mia Academy and arriving at Saint-Noel Academy, Mia eagerly made a beeline for the bathhouse to soak away her travel fatigue. Anne—in case anyone was wondering—had also made a beeline, except in her case it was to various acquaintances in the academy to promptly inform them of Mia's return. An ardent lover of bath-fueled girl talk, Mia was more than a little disappointed by her maid's absence.

"By the way, Bel, you were getting along with the kids back there, weren't you?" she said as Bel followed her into the bathhouse.

"I sure was! They were so cute! Hee hee." Bel seemed delighted to have gotten the chance to play the role of big sister. The sight of her grinning caused Mia to follow suit. "But the most amazing thing was just getting to see the place. It's the legendary Saint Mia Academy, after all! I never thought I'd get to walk around in it. What an experience that was!"

"Ah. Well...I'm glad you liked the place so much. At least they were getting some proper work done there..."

Frankly, if she'd shown up and all they had to show for their efforts was a big expensive building and *that wooden sculpture*, she might have lost it on the spot.

"Still, the experiments didn't look too promising," she continued. "I'm sure Arshia and Cyril are trying their best, but at this rate, I'm not sure when we'll actually get a couple of kernels of the wheat in question."

Mia pursed her lips in thought.

"It seems like...I'd better stay on good terms with Perujin, as well as Chloe's father."

Ganudos Port Country was arguably relevant too, but as long as the empire remained functional, they should keep playing ball. Probably.

"Hm. A friendly visit to Chloe and Rania sounds like a good idea. I think

it's time to do some catching up with the two of them," she murmured as she entered the changing room. "My! What perfect timing." Her eyes lit up at the sight of a figure she'd just been thinking about. "Rania, it's been a while."

"Hm? Oh, Princess Mia! It sure has," said a pleasantly surprised Rania.

"Are you here for a bath too?" asked Mia.

Rania grinned. "I am, but that's beside the point. I've been meaning to try a form of bathing that's popular in Perujin, so I booked the communal baths for my use."

"Did you, now? Fascinating!"

Mia was, in a word, a bath nut. She loved leisurely soaks about as much as she loved food and sleep. Together, the three formed—in her opinion—the ultimate trinity of pleasure. Therefore, any mention of potential improvements to her bathing experience was going to receive her full and undivided attention. It was *literally* one of the things she lived for.

"I got some bath herbs from Chloe a while back that made a lot of smoke when I put them in the water. Is Perujin's the same kind of thing?"

"Smoke...is not part of the experience. Actually, why don't you just see for yourself?"

Rania gestured for her to follow, so she quickly slipped out of her clothes and stepped into the bath chamber. The moment she did, the humid scent of warm vapors entered her nose...along with something else.

"My, do I smell...fruits?" As she peered through the veil of steam, the pool slowly came into view. "Is that what I think it is...?" She squinted. "It is! There are fruits floating in there!"

A number of yellow oval-shaped fruits bobbed up and down in the water. Even with her extensive experience in forest survival, Mia had never seen anything like them—not that she'd actually seen a whole lot of fruits in the forest. There had once been a time when she entertained fantasies about subsisting on wild fruit in the forest, but she no longer did so. Her experience in the previous timeline had been a harsh reality check.

She now knew that finding edible fruit in a forest was nothing short of a miracle. As a result, she'd focused her knowledge acquisition on edible plants and mushrooms, along with a smattering of fish. Staple foods of the forest survival scene were second nature to her by this point. Compared to the average noble, she was arguably a minor expert. Nevertheless, at the

end of the day, it was still more of a hobby than anything, so she hadn't applied the same rigorous approach of exhaustive memorization as her other studies.

"What are they?" asked Mia.

"They're called southstar lemons. They grow in an area further south of Perujin, and they're really sour." Rania, who'd followed her in, picked up one of the floating fruits and held it out to her. "Here, see what it smells like."

Mia sniffed it as instructed. "I see. It has a very sharp scent."

"Southstar lemons are often used as seasoning in cooking, but it's said that they can relieve fatigue if you put them in a bath like this."

"My! Then what are we waiting for? Let's give them a try!"

Mia promptly scooted to the shower area and washed herself off. In defiance of the common perception of pampered princesses who were bathed by their attendants, her motions were practiced and efficient, exuding the air of a seasoned bath-goer. Within minutes, she was clean and ready to soak. So she did, lowering herself into the warm embrace of the pool's water while letting out that guttural groan of *ooof* shared by bath-loving grandparents everywhere upon initiation of immersion. She...might have been becoming a bit *too* seasoned in the bathing department.

Heat permeated through every pore in her body. Tension drained from her muscles. She felt as if all her accumulated fatigue was seeping out of her. It would do well to remember that although she might have *looked* like a teenager, she was actually over twenty years old on the inside. As a working adult, she had to deal with adult problems, like stiff necks and sore backs— Wait, that doesn't happen to twenty-year-olds. She was still in some of the peachiest years of her life!

...Which pretty much meant there was only one other explanation: she was just plain out of shape.

In any case, the soothful sensation delighted her. *These fruits are a marvel!*

"It feels so nice, Miss Mia!" exclaimed a smiling Bel soaking beside her.

"It sure does. I'd never heard of floating fruits in a bath before. Fascinating."

Mia picked up a southstar lemon that had drifted near her. She smiled at the ovoid fruit. "I have to say, Rania, I'm surprised that Perujin royalty are

fond of baths too. I had no idea you've been doing this kind of research..."

Rania, the last to get in, shook her head. "No, taking baths isn't very prevalent among Perujin royalty either. We just wash ourselves and call it a day." She smiled. "This is...more of an export item. In order for our country to grow wealthier, we're always researching new crops and finding ways to sell them. It's the Perujin way."

For some reason, Mia couldn't help but feel that there was a tinge of sadness in that smile.

"Phew..."

Mia stretched in the pool. After soaking in the pool, she'd taken a dip in the cool water before jumping back into the hot. The cold reset her body's senses, allowing her to fully appreciate the pleasure of immersion in warm water again. Like a veteran wine taster, she was applying the principle of palate cleansing. Mia was a bath sommelier!

"This...is some good stuff! *Very* good. I'm calling it right now. This is definitely going to take off."

Thus concluded Mia the bath sommelier in her review of southstar lemons.

"It sure is, isn't it, Miss Mia? I hope we can do this again and have Rina join us next time," said Bel who, following Mia's lead, had just returned from her own dip in cool water. She sunk into the pool and kicked at the water playfully. Judging from the sheer delight on her face, Mia's fondness for baths had made its way through two generations of trait inheritance.

"Yes, we can bring Rina next time, but please behave yourself, Bel. One must be proper and ladylike in her bathing conduct," pronounced Mia. Presumably, guttural *ooof*s were fair game in her definition of "ladylike."

"Okay! I'll try hard to become a proper lady like you, Grand— Miss Mia!"

No one was present to point out the irony in the exchange. In the Bel-Mia comedy duo, neither was a straight man. There were no laughs to be had here. It *did* make for a lot of innocent smiles though, which was nice.

"...Wait." That was when Mia realized something was wrong. They weren't a duo. There was a third person with them, and she hadn't spoken in a while.

Is it just me, or does Rania look a little down?

The Perujin princess sat on the side of the pool with only her slender legs in the water. Her eyes were downcast, and though she occasionally kicked up a few splashes, it seemed more an idle motion than a deliberate gesture of amusement. Granted, the risk of over-soaking was inherent to hot baths, resulting in discomfort and dizziness. Figuring Rania had probably slightly overstayed her welcome in the pool, Mia was about to go back to savoring the all-encompassing warmth when an alarm went off in her head.

No, hold on a minute. Something about her seems off.

It was the vaguest of feelings—something she couldn't put her finger on. However, this was Rania Tafrif Perujin, the person whose assistance she desperately needed to overcome the famine. The slightest rift in their relationship could be fatal. Her chicken sensor, calibrated to squawk at even the faintest hint of danger, had begun to throw a fit. Not wanting to run a-fowl of its warning, she opened her mouth.

"Uhh... Rania?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, I'm glad you're enjoying the fruit bath," she said with a start, hiding her thoughts behind a smile. "And it's not just the bath. I have new sweets too. Whenever you have time, I'd love for you to come and give them a try. I think you'll really like them."

"My! New Perujin sweets! Count me in!"

A host of fancy treats began to float through her mind. She envisioned novel Perujin cakes, innovative cookies, and a long line of silhouettes with question marks on them, representing even more wonderful delicacies that surpassed the limits of her imagination. She wiped a line of drool from the corner of her lips.

"I'm pretty confident about the lineup this time," Rania added. Then, she asked in a hesitant tone, "By the way...is my sister doing well?"

"Hm? You mean Arshia? Of course. I met with her before coming back to Saint-Noel, and she looked great. Groundwork on the fields is done, and she's started experimenting by planting different strains of wheat. Oh, she's pretty popular with the kids too. They really look up to her," answered Mia.

Just then, inspiration struck.

Aha! I know what this is about. Oh, Rania, I've got you all figured out. Your sister has gone to Tearmoon, and you're feeling lonely now! That's why you looked a little down.

Having ostensibly solved the Case of the Sad Rania, Mia gave her a

tender look of understanding. “The two of you are really close, aren’t you?” she said with a gentle giggle.

“N-No, that’s not true...” Rania replied, though her embarrassed smile betrayed her words. “It’s just that...she’s my big sister. And I’m proud of her. I’m not worried about her or anything, but sometimes...I just wonder if she’s, you know, doing okay by herself in Tearmoon. If she’s taking care of herself. I mean, she writes to me, but...”

“Mm-hm, an understandable sentiment. Say, Rania, would you happen to have some time after this?” Mia asked as she contemplatively crossed her arms.

“Huh? I...guess so?”

“Good. Come to my room then. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about some things, so let’s have a nice long chat over tea.”

Frankly, it would have been easier for Mia to just stay here and tell Rania about her sister. However, given Rania’s VIP status, she figured it couldn’t hurt to put some extra effort in. Thus, Mia resolved to play the gracious host. The plan was to offer Rania plenty of tea and sweets, then slowly relay Arshia’s circumstances, allowing ample time for the food and drink to take their euphoric effect on her mood. Improving her impression of Mia would surely lead to smoother relations between Tearmoon and Perujin.

Indeed, Mia’s friendly offer was, in fact, entirely political.

“It’s been so long since I’ve gotten to enjoy Perujin sweets! And you have new ones? Moons, I can barely wait!”

Okay, maybe half political. A quarter, at least. The rest was her sweet tooth talking.

Rania blinked a few times in surprise. Then, her expression brightened. “All right, let me go get the sweets.”

After concluding her bath, Rania promptly fetched the sweets and headed to Mia’s room. She brought a Perujin creation known as sunblessed delights, which were made using sun-dried fruits from her region. These treats were sent with her under explicit instruction from her father to “go and advertise these in Saint-Noel.”

Her father’s words echoed in her mind. *“It’s all for the prosperity of our country.”* His teachings had been drilled into her from childhood. They

grew crops, sold them to more powerful nations, and thereby enriched their country. That was the Perujin path to prosperity, and Rania, in her duty as a princess, was to dedicate her life to it. They would continue to do this, year by year, generation by generation...until the day they could get back at those greater powers. For as long as she could remember, she'd obeyed her mission. But...

Did Princess Mia...see right through me?

The way Mia had looked at her in the bathhouse lingered in her memory. There'd been something penetrating about her gaze. Something gently admonishing in her eyes. Her smile had seemed all-knowing. Then, she'd invited Rania to tea.

"She noticed. No, she probably knew all along...that I've been feeling down."

Rania took a long breath. Then, she opened the door to Mia's room.

"Ah, good timing, Rania. I just got the tea ready. Shall we begin?" Mia said, her smile friendly and disarming. Her expression seemed deliberate, as if she were trying to cheer up a dejected friend. "Oooh, are those the new Perujin sweets? Quickly, show me!"

Her voice was bright, brimming with unfiltered excitement. It sounded so sincere, as if she truly *was* eager to try the sweets.

"We call them sunblessed delights. Here, take a look," said Rania, holding out a plate. "They're made from fruits, but in this case, the fruits have been dried, so they keep for a long time. It also dilutes the tartness and makes them much tastier."

"Hm, hm. I see, I see." Mia regarded the plate's contents with narrowed eyes. "They look...sort of like shriveled fruits. To be honest, they don't look all that tasty..."

"Try one."

Mia did as told, taking her knife and fork in hand and carefully cutting off a piece to place in her mouth. As soon as the piece touched her tongue, her expression blossomed with pure bliss.

"Aaah... It's so sweet! And there's a gumminess to it that enriches the flavor."

"We made sure they're sweet, of course, but we also put a lot of effort into preserving the fruit's natural flavor. The scent, especially, I think is something worth appreciating."

“It absolutely is! They’re completely dried out, but the flavor is still there. How did you manage to do that? Some sort of secret drying technique?”

“Well, sort of. It’s not as simple as just leaving it out in the sun. I’ll tell you that much. The process is pretty complicated.”

“I see.” Visibly impressed, Mia examined each of the sunblessed delights in turn before giggling. “I must say though, you’re quite the saleswoman, Rania. Just listening to your explanation made them look tastier.”

The compliment proved effective, and Rania couldn’t help but giggle as well.

“I’m glad you like them.”

Mia went through two more delights before finally leaning back and taking a satisfied sip of tea. Then, with a sense of deliberateness, she said, “Now then, let’s talk about Arshia... I believe you know she’s working as a lecturer, but as a matter of fact, I’ve also entrusted her with another very important task.”

“...What kind of task?” Rania hadn’t actually heard from Arshia about what exactly her job entailed. The letters had mentioned that she’d been ordered by Mia to work on a certain project and that her days were very fulfilling, but also that she couldn’t disclose any details about the project, even to family.

Arshia had to abide by a confidentiality clause, but surely, the same didn’t apply to Mia. After all, Mia was the one who issued the clause in the first place. If she was willing to talk, then all was well. Thrilled to finally have the chance to find out more, Rania regarded Mia with intense fascination.

“I asked Arshia to work on developing a new strain of wheat...that can resist the cold.”

“‘Wheat that can resist the cold’?” parroted a baffled Rania. “I guess I do remember father talking about how this year’s weather is also worrying, but...*cold-resistant wheat*? Does that even exist?”

Rania’s upbringing as a princess of Perujin engrained in her an intimate understanding of the degree of devastation a sun-shy year could wreak. Without enough of its heavenly blessings, grains would be small and hollow, with no sign of any kernels. It was common sense in Perujin that

whenever a year like that came around, the only choice was to simply throw one's hands in the air and give up.

They understood the principles of selective breeding. In fact, they applied them constantly in pursuit of strains that tasted better and produced more kernels. Never, however, had they conducted any research into a strain that could withstand the occasional cold wave that would decimate yields. The very thought of such research had not so much as crossed any of their minds.

Mia, meanwhile, looked Rania in the eye and declared, "It *can* exist. And we'll make it so. I guarantee it."

There wasn't a shred of doubt in her voice. How could she speak with such conviction about a thing whose existence was yet unfounded?

Wow... Princess Mia really trusts Arshia, doesn't she?

Because it *wasn't* unfounded—it was rooted in Mia's unwavering trust in Rania's sister. A quiet breath of awe escaped Rania's lips. The development of a strain of wheat that could grow well with limited blessing from the sun meant people would stop going hungry. Hadn't that been her sister's dream? Arshia had spoken about it frequently, almost incessantly, when they were young.

"...Must be nice." Before she knew it, the words had slipped out of her.

"Hm? What was that?" said Mia, arching an eyebrow.

"Oh, sorry, don't worry about it," said Rania, catching herself. However, she soon grimaced and added, "It's just that Arshia's out there doing great things... Things that are useful, and good for everyone... And seeing that, it makes me wonder what I'm doing with my life. More and more, I feel like I'm wasting my time. It all seems so meaningless..."

"My, that seems overly harsh of an opinion. It's not like you're doing nothing, right? I mean, look, you're helping Perujin sell its delicious sweets to another nation as we speak. The way you describe your products makes me feel like I need to buy a few crates every time. Doesn't that sound like a perfectly worthwhile endeavor? It does to me."

"I...guess so."

Mia's compliment failed to brighten Rania's mood. It wasn't that she didn't care about enriching the people of Perujin through commerce. No, that certainly did have value. The way her father did things, though... His *attitude*... Lately, it had begun to bug her. She couldn't help but hear the

subtle undertones: only Perujin's prosperity mattered—every other nation's was irrelevant. There was something vindictive about it, more ego than compassion, as if prosperity was merely the means, and getting back at greater powers was the true end. More and more, she'd begun to feel that everything she did was simply abetting this dubious goal. And now, juxtaposed against her sister's efforts to prevent poor children from starving... It was all too much. She felt so...

Small...and hollow. Is this it? Am I going to be stuck doing such pointless work for the rest of my life?

Rania was questioning her own way of life for the first time. She looked at Mia, wondering how much easier it would have been if this girl had conformed to the stereotype of her station. If only she'd been proud, arrogant, and a fundamentally awful person like powerful princesses were supposed to be. Then, Rania could spite her without a second thought. She thought of Arshia, wondering how much simpler it would have been if she'd obeyed their father and married herself to some foreign royalty for the good of their country. If only she'd dedicated her life to Perujin's prosperity alone...

But neither of them lived up to these stereotypical expectations, and their respective dignities only served to highlight the pettiness of Rania's own struggles. It forced her to question herself. Was the delivery of national comeuppance its only purpose? Was her raison d'être simply to spite Mia and the Tearmoon Empire? And if it was...would she ever be able to look her sister in the eye again?

Rania's hesitant tone prompted a contemplative "hmm" from Mia, who then said, "I see you're not convinced. In that case... Oh, here's a thought! How about you spread the word of Arshia's wheat development to other nations? She does the research, and you handle the marketing."

"Huh?" Rania blinked in surprise at the sudden suggestion.

"You recognize the value in her work, after all," Mia continued. "Why don't you help her by promoting it to the people around you? You've certainly got a knack for generating interest in things." She clapped her hands together, as if profoundly satisfied by the genius of her own inspiration.

"This is quite the excellent idea, if I do say so myself!"

"You want me...to help Arshia?" Rania murmured, trying to process the

implications.

Then she did know. She saw right through me, she thought as she regarded Mia. *She already figured out what was troubling me, and now she's offering me a solution...*

That, Rania figured, must've been why Mia had been so insistent on trying the new Perujin sweets at this tea party. By listening to her give her spiel on the sweets, Mia could praise her eloquence and use the context to give her a suggestion. It was all a setup, but an effective one, for it weaved a coherent string of logic that led to a convincing conclusion—she had what it takes to help her sister in a meaningful way.

Then again, maybe I'm overthinking this, and that wasn't her intention at all. But even then...

She felt like she'd found a path forward—no, *the* path forward—that would allow her to follow her heart...and be proud of herself while doing it. It would be work that she both could do and *wanted* to do. Work she could show her sister with glee instead of shame.

For the first time, Rania began to think seriously about her life.

Now, it hardly bears mentioning, but Rania was *definitely* overthinking things. Deepness of thought and Mia did not go together.

Even if Arshia and Cyril successfully develop the new wheat strain, there's the problem of where we'll plant them.

Mia wanted to lower the cost of wheat. To that end, she needed to increase the total supply in circulation. Assuming they managed to produce cold-resistant wheat, she'd need to plant a lot of them. The Rudolvon and Gilden lands alone would probably be insufficient. Even adding in all the fields around Saint Mia Academy didn't seem like enough. Ideally, they'd grow the new wheat all over the empire. That, however, would entail persuading a whole lot of Tearmoon nobles, and frankly, Mia couldn't be bothered to deal with the sheer density of their skulls. The issue of increasing domestic production was something she'd have to solve sooner or later, but given the choice, she'd rather solve it later. For the time being, it was far easier to hand seeds to neighboring nations like Perujin and ask them to grow the things.

"You want me...to help Arshia?"

"Absolutely. I think you'll find the work to be very meaningful. Don't

you agree?" she said with the brightest of smiles.

Her goal was to spread the new wheat throughout the continent. That way, the price of wheat being imported into the empire would inevitably fall. She was, in essence, borrowing the land of other nations to lower the price of wheat in her own.

If I get Rania on board, I'll save myself so much effort! Mia beamed. Things were going her way, and sweets were entering her mouth. Life was good.

Chapter 7: My? Actually, That Time, I Was...

"What? Greeting the new students?"

At Saint-Noel Academy, spring was fast approaching. On this day of warm sunshine and sweetmoon cherry blossoms, Mia was attending a student council meeting. In the office was the usual crowd. They'd discussed a number of topics, and the one that was currently occupying their attention was the entrance ceremony.

"But...aren't you the one who usually welcomes the new students?" asked Mia.

"I'll be speaking at the ceremony too, of course, but I think our new students would appreciate a few words from the student council president as well," Rafina replied with a gentle smile.

"So it's part of the president's responsibilities. Hm... What should I say?"

Rafina let out a short giggle.

"Oh, don't worry too much about it. Just be honest and say what's on your mind."

On the surface, her comment seemed reassuring...but Mia knew better.

This is definitely the kind of suggestion that I can't take at face value.

She was well aware that she couldn't simply say whatever came to mind; she wasn't *that* stupid. The role of student council president was something Rafina had willingly yielded to her. There were *expectations* involved. Expectations that would be grievously betrayed if she were to get up onto the podium and talk about her favorite cakes.

"There's no rush, so give it some time," said Rafina. "I'll send you the draft of my speech from last year later, so you can take a look at that too."

"All right then." Mia forced herself to nod. A direct request from Rafina was not something she could afford to turn down.

Oh, well. I guess it's not too bad. It's not like I have to risk my neck for

this, she thought, trying to console herself. *No, probably not.*

"All right, everyone," said Rafina, clapping for attention. "That was a very enjoyable chat, but I believe it's time we got down to business." Her expression sobered. "Serious business. I'm sure it's been on all your minds, but I've managed to extract some information out of the Serpent, Ms. Barbara."

Oh right, Barbara. I did send her to Miss Rafina, didn't I? I completely forgot.

There was at least one mind it hadn't been on.

"Yeah, I've definitely been wondering. So? What did you find out?" asked Abel.

Sion remained quiet but steepled his hands and leaned forward. Unlike Mia, both princes had evidently been waiting for this moment. Fearing her own lack of concern would be exposed, she began to explain the context of the upcoming topic to the members who hadn't been present, taking extra care to choose phrasing that implied she'd been thinking about the issue as well.

"And so, after we captured Barbara and her lackeys, I asked for them to be delivered to Miss Rafina," she concluded. Then, for good measure, she added, "They've definitely been on my mind ever since." With that, she took a sip of tea and breathed the contented sigh of someone who just successfully covered up a significant blunder.

Rafina promptly continued the story. "After returning from Miss Mia's birthday festival, I immediately began the interrogation. Oh, I say 'interrogation,' but I didn't do anything violent, of course. Personally, I think they deserve some punishment for the terrible disservice they did you," she said with a look at Mia, "but I figured you'd be upset if I was too rough with them... So I gave them the same treatment as Jem."

She smiled calmly at Mia, who found the expression a little scary and promptly smiled back to hide her fear.

"That did get them to talk," Rafina continued, her gaze shifting to the others in the room, "but very little of what they had to say was new information. They talked about how the Chaos Serpents are led by someone they call a high priestess and that there are people known as shamans who spread the Serpents' teachings. Oh, they also mentioned the wolfmaster."

"The wolfmaster..." Mia repeated.

“Yes,” Rafina said, nodding, “the assassin known as the wolfmaster apparently takes orders directly from the high priestess and is a peerless warrior.”

“A peerless warrior?! I-I was being targeted by someone like that? Sweet moons...”

Memories of her desperate horseback dash across the winter plains came flooding back. The skin on the back of her neck tingled as she recalled the swooshes of air she’d felt as the assassin’s blade had missed her by what had seemed like a hair. It sent chills up her spine.

Moons, it’s a miracle my head is still on my shoulders... Wait, it is *still on my shoulders, right? This isn’t some sort of nightmare scenario where I’m actually dead but don’t realize it, is it?! You’re all talking to me, aren’t you? That means I’m alive, right?!* she thought in a moment of deranged panic, fearing she’d glance at something reflective and find nothing but empty air above her neck.

While Mia occupied herself with such absurd musings, Rafina kept explaining.

“By the way, I read the letter you sent me, and its contents helped me put together a working theory of sorts...” she said, looking back toward Mia. “Miss Mia, could I ask you to describe the different categories of Chaos Serpents for us?”

“Huh? O-Oh, you mean what Duke Yellowmoon was talking about? Uh... I’m pretty sure he said the Chaos Serpents can be grouped into four types of people,” she answered, feeling profoundly relieved to be talked to, for it confirmed that she was not, in fact, dead. “There are those who passively collaborate with the Serpents, those who actively work with the Serpents in an attempt to use them for their own purposes, those who resonate with the Serpents’ teachings and become adherents, and shamans who instruct and guide those adherents. I...think that’s how it went?” she said, recalling the four cookies the duke had placed on the table.

Words alone were hard to remember, so Mia associated them with tasty-looking cookies. It was the Mia memorization method.

“Yes, that’s what you wrote in the letter. Based on that categorization, I suspect the men we captured are *adherents*.”

Mia pursed her lips, recalling the appearances of Barbara’s lackeys. “I think you’re right. Those men certainly do give off an evil cultist aura. They

seem like the type who'd give their lives for some twisted ideology..."

"Indeed, and I believe it's the adherents and shamans who react negatively to the Holy Book."

"Ah, that makes sense," said Sion, who immediately nodded with comprehension. "I always thought it was strange how their reactions to the Holy Book weren't uniform. That would explain it..."

"Yes. It depends on whether they accept the Serpents' teachings as truth. In other words, whether they see the Serpents as divine or simply a tool to be used. For those who view the Serpents with reverence, the Holy Book would represent the teachings of their mortal enemy. It must be *abhorrent* to them. Something utterly intolerable that they reject on a fundamental level. That's why they reacted so strongly to it." Rafina paused. Her tone took on a sense of uncertainty. "That's...what I thought, at least."

"Hm? What do you mean? Did something change your mind?" asked Mia with a puzzled tilt of her head.

"It's Ms. Barbara. She seemed...*different*, somehow. What I felt from her wasn't just rejection... There was certainly some of that, but there was much more hate. A deep-seated hatred of not just the Lord but me, and all those like me... Nobles, royalty, all of us..."

"'A deep-seated hatred'?" Mia thought of the times she'd seen Barbara. "Now that you mention it, I do remember Bel saying she was pretty harsh on Rina. She seemed to hate Duke Yellowmoon a lot too, for whatever reason."

"One way to explain her behavior is that she truly believes in the Serpents' teachings, so she hates the authority of nobility and the societal order that's based on it. That would certainly make sense...but I feel like there's something more..."

Rafina's musing was followed by a period of silence that was eventually broken by a soft whisper from Abel. "Man, we know so little about these people. I really wonder what kind of person this high priestess of the Serpents is."

For some reason, his comment continued to reverberate in Mia's mind, long after his voice had faded.

Phew... What a meeting that was. It looks like things are going to get complicated, thought Mia.

She also hadn't expected to be given homework, and the thought elicited a sigh from her as she left the student council office. Rafina, who happened to be heading back to the girls' dormitory as well, walked alongside Mia wearing her usual polite smile.

"Gosh, it's not that big of a deal," said Rafina in a comforting tone. "You don't have to stress yourself out over it."

"You say that, but it *is* a pretty big deal for me. I'm not very good with this kind of thing..."

"Just be honest. Head up there and tell the students how you feel, and I'm sure it'll be okay."

Mia appreciated Rafina's encouragement but doubted its applicability. Just as she opened her mouth to dispute her, an overriding thought caused her to laugh instead.

To be fretting over an issue like this... At a time like this... While being encouraged by Miss Rafina... It's actually a blessing, isn't it? I should be thankful, honestly.

Now that Mia was back in Saint-Noel Academy, her outlook was growing more optimistic.

After all, whatever the case, Ludwig said we'll be fine. We've increased our food stockpiles as planned. I guess at a certain point, I just have to stop worrying. The only point of concern was whether Cyril would figure out how to grow cold-resistant wheat. *But even if that doesn't happen, things will probably work out, right?*

They'd set up supply routes and filled storehouses. Reserves were growing; progress was steady. Having once walked the hellscape of famine, she felt like she had a pretty good idea of how bad things would get and how much preparation was necessary. Surely, they were ready now. Alas, she fell victim to the pitfall of experience, forgetting that changing circumstances could invalidate prior knowledge. The consequence of her complacency would be swift and sudden, showing up right in front of her as she walked down a hallway with Rafina.

"My... What's going on over there?"

Their chat was interrupted by the sight of a girl who looked like a new student being surrounded by a number of older students. One of the older students pushed the girl on the shoulder, making her lose her balance and fall to the ground. She remained facedown on her hands and knees as the

ring of aggressors began to shower her with verbal abuse.

Mia swiftly assessed the bullies and heaved a sigh. None of these young nobles who *had to be out of their flipping minds to be acting up in front of Rafina* were from the empire. Then, with a spring in her step, she approached the ring of harassers.

“Excuse me, but would you people mind not bullying the weak? It’s a rather unseemly thing to do.”

“Say what? Who’re you to— Oh.”

One of the bullies swung around with a confrontational retort, only to choke it back down mid-sentence. The person it had been meant for was not someone they could afford offending.

“P-Princess Mia...and Miss Rafina?!”

“We seem to have a dilemma on our hands. Bullying new students is not acceptable behavior for students of this academy,” said Mia.

“N-No, that’s not— Sh-She’s one of ours. A commoner from our kingdom. We thought it must have been a mistake for her to be enrolled in an academy of such noble heritage as Saint-Noel...”

Rafina quietly walked up to the student babbling excuses and said with the gentlest of smiles, “Mia, our student council president, very much dislikes this type of behavior. As do I. No matter what kingdom you’re from, it’s still inexcusable for a large group to bully an individual. Isn’t that so, Miss Mia?”

“Y-Yes, of course it is.”

Rafina’s intimidating aura spooked not only her victims but Mia as well, who flinched ever so slightly before recomposing herself.

“Your parentage and homeland is irrelevant,” said Mia, nodding as she crossed her arms in an imposing manner. “Such injustice is impermissible, and I will not allow it to go unanswered for.”

She fixed the bullies with her most intimidating glare, which had only a fraction of Rafina’s impact, but nevertheless added to the effect and sent them recoiling in fear. Their frightened reaction was well-deserved, for Mia currently stood at the top of Saint-Noel’s power hierarchy. She was the princess of a powerful empire, and she also had the backing of the Holy Lady, which put her at the very top of the “don’t get glared at by this person if you want to stay in this school” list.

“Fortunately for you,” Mia continued, “I believe in second chances. So

long as you mend your ways, I won't pursue this matter further. Do not harass her *ever* again. If you're a noble, then you should behave like one. Conduct yourself with dignity and nobility. Distance yourself from deplorable acts like oppressing the weak. If anything, you should be using your power to *help* the weak." Then, after a nodding *hmm*, she added, "You said you're all from the same kingdom as her, right? In that case, I shall charge you with her protection."

"...What?"

"From now on, if I ever hear of her being bullied again, I will have all of you answer for it, regardless of whether you were involved in the incident. And a word of caution, in case you're ever tempted to do something behind my back: underestimate my eyes and ears at your own peril." Then, in a mischief-fueled flash of inspiration, she mimicked Rafina's smile. The result was extremely satisfying. With a scream of terror, the bullies fled the scene.

Hm, hm. I see. Smiles can sometimes be used to strike terror into other people. Fascinating, she thought as she offered a hand to the girl on the ground.

"Are you okay?"

"Y-Yes, I think so... Um, thank you very much. B-But, um...why would you help someone like me?" stammered the flustered girl.

Mia chuckled. "Why wouldn't I? It's the natural thing to do."

Rafina was watching, after all. Not helping was never an option. Just then, she felt a chill. It took her a few moments to figure out why. The thought of being forced to help had caused the slow dawning of another realization. It occurred to her that with the famine approaching, she might be placed in such a situation again, only on a much larger scale. In the previous timeline, she never had to consider this issue, because the empire was already swamped by the needs of its own people. Things were different now. The empire was stocked and ready. They had enough food to make it through a year-long famine with plenty to spare. But the famine would last much more than a year—it would last *many* years. And Mia was the only one who knew that. She'd prepared for an extended famine, but the other nations probably hadn't. Chances are, they'd assume it was just a bad year. How, then, would they feel when they looked to the empire after their expectations were proven false...and saw massive stockpiles of food that

could last through years of famine? More importantly, how would Rafina and Sion feel?

She'd warned Sion already, and she intended to tell Rafina too. However, everything she had to say was, at the present time, conjecture at best. What if the famine struck, and they sought her help? Asked her to spare some of Tearmoon's ostensibly plentiful stores? She'd have to swat away their pleading hands—deny earnest and desperate requests for assistance—on the basis of something that was at best anticipatory prudence and at worst baseless speculation.

Making things worse was another factor she'd failed to take into consideration: her growing circle of friends. As student council president, she'd inadvertently made connections with all sorts of people from all sorts of places. In the process of doing her work, she'd gotten to know a number of them very well, many to the point of forging true friendships. What if one of these friends were to come to her for help, and she objectively had the resources to help them?

If another kingdom ends up in the same situation as my past life's empire...could I bring myself to hold on to our stockpile and just watch them suffer?

Mia's concern was, to perhaps many's surprise, a legitimate and serious dilemma. What she now faced was an entirely new crisis brought about by the fact that she *had* prepared for a years-long famine. Having been ready to sit back and relax, figuring it was time to cruise, this upsetting realization caught her completely off guard.

So, Mia reluctantly waved her metaphorical hammock goodbye and forced her brain into work-mode again. Her next task: greeting the new students at the entrance ceremony.

Chapter 8: The Bread-Cake Declaration

The day for the entrance ceremony came at last. Like all of Saint-Noel Academy's events, in addition to being a school event, there was a ritualistic aspect to the entrance ceremony. Mia walked into the student-filled cathedral, seated herself at the frontmost row, and closed her eyes. After some time, the ceremony began. First, a sacred hymn was sung in honor of the Lord. Next came the Rite of Incense, which was an important ritual in the process of inducting new students to the academy. It involved the students applying blessed aromatic oils to themselves and, immersed in their divine fragrance, promising to conduct themselves in a manner befitting the standards of Saint-Noel Academy.

Eventually, Rafina entered the cathedral dressed in a pure white garb. Its quality fabric was beautifully illuminated by the cathedral's lighting and further accentuated the few areas of lustrously revealed skin. Mia regarded her angelic appearance with mixed feelings, as it reminded her of a certain sculpture she'd seen at Saint Mia Academy earlier.

Rafina accepted a torch from the priest and walked to the front of the cathedral, where an enormous silver chalice sat atop a ceremonial table. Inside the chalice was aromatic oil of the highest quality, to which she slowly brought the torch. There was a sharp crack followed by a burst of flame. Soon, a sweet fragrance wafted through the cathedral.

Huh. Not that I care all that much, but I guess premium aromatic oils are supposed to smell sweet. Makes sense. As a budding sweets freak with one foot in the sugar cult door, Mia immediately assumed there was a direct correlation between the quality of an aromatic oil and the sweetness of its fragrance. At this rate, she might want to start worrying about whether Rafina might one day try her for heresy. Anyway...

"Now then," Rafina said once the sequence of rituals concluded, "Miss Mia, the student council president, would like to greet our new students."

At Rafina's bidding, Mia stepped up and drew a small breath. Standing

at the front of the cathedral, the aromatic flame glowing like a halo behind her back, she gazed across the vast space, observing her audience. Another breath, this time deeper. After inhaling enough gaseous sweetness, she began in a soft voice.

"Greetings, everyone. I'm your student council president, Mia Luna Tearmoon."

The pace of her heart was surprisingly steady, and her mind was calm. In preparing for this moment, she'd pondered and pondered...and arrived at a certain conclusion.

It's likely impossible for the empire to keep its stockpile entirely to itself.

She'd considered a host of potential excuses...but ultimately gave up. Even if she were to fake the numbers of their provisions and successfully deceive both Sion and Rafina, she highly doubted she could keep the truth hidden from the elusive Serpents. Besides...

It'd leave a terrible aftertaste.

Having experienced no small amount of rejection in the previous timeline, she couldn't help but consider how the other party would feel if she were to deny their request for help. Should she do so, a bad night's sleep followed by a day of an upset stomach would surely be in store.

In which case, I might as well just assume off the bat that we'll be sharing our provisions with other kingdoms.

That meant a change of course was necessary.

"What I'd like to speak about today...is the spirit of mutual aid!" Instead of it being *her* problem, she was going to make it *everyone's* problem! "In other words, helping each other in times of need. We who are in positions of power must take care of the people we rule. During difficult times when our people are in great need, we must join together—all of us, irrespective of borders and nations—to help them."

If she had to cough up some of her stockpile, then so be it. But by the moons, she wasn't doing so alone! The point she wanted to drive home was essentially "if some kingdom asks for help, the empire will step in, but the rest of you had better pony up what you can too!" But her scheme didn't end there. There was an additional goal—ensuring that, in a pinch, she didn't end up with the short end of the stick.

"To help and to be helped... That kind of reciprocal solidarity between nations is absolutely essential!"

She spoke with passion and insistence, but if one were to bypass her words and focus on her intent, it would boil down to: “sure, the empire will open up its food stores to you during a famine, but if the empire runs into trouble down the road, you’d better give us a hand in return.” Helping each other in times of need, by Mia’s definition, meant: “I’ll help you when *you’re* in a bind, so make sure to help me back when *I’m* in a bind!”

Having realized that she couldn’t afford to hoard all her savings, she decided to ensure that she wouldn’t end up the sole sucker. If her pantry had to suffer, then everyone else’s had to too. And the most important part of this process was formally declaring so in front of Rafina, along with a roomful of young nobility who hailed from a multitude of nations. Past Mia had unwittingly made many messes of things due to ignorance. Present Mia spelled things out very explicitly so no one could do the same. Having learned from her experiences, she wasn’t about to give anyone the excuse of ignorance.

“That is the manner in which I’d like you to conduct yourselves. It is my dearest hope that you’ll be the kind of people who...” She took a moment to sweep her gaze across the room. “If today, you see a starving man who has no bread...then tomorrow, you will take the cake you’ve been looking forward to eating and share it with him. We would all prefer to have the cake to ourselves, but you mustn’t allow that desire to lead you to forsaking the destitute.”

What she did *not* do was ask them to take the cake they’ve been looking forward to eating and hand the whole thing to the starving fellow. After all, the principle applied to her too, and Mia wanted cake. Eating a little less and sharing the remainder was the absolute furthest she was willing to go in terms of compromise. Not a step more. Also, if the slice of cake had a strawberry on it, you can bet your behind she’d keep it on her portion. Strawberries were non-negotiable.

Mia exhaled before continuing.

“It is my belief that going forward, much will occur across the continent. A number of nations will likely enter a time of hardship. We, however, are fellow students of Saint-Noel. Together, we have breathed this divine aroma. And together, we live on a shared continent. May we all remember that, even after we’ve returned to our respective homelands.”

Then, she closed her eyes, as though praying.

She *was* praying, in fact.

Whoever's listening up there, please... Please let Cyril and Arshia figure out how to make cold-resistant wheat. Because if they don't, I really don't think we'll have enough food for everyone.

Mia's speech that day would be forever immortalized in the pages of history, known to later generations as the "Bread-Cake Declaration." The words she'd spoken were extraordinary ones, for they'd seemed like crude ale but aged like fine wine. When first uttered, they'd been undeniably trite. Stale, soulless words that every listener in the moment had recognized as the kind of empty talk they'd heard a million times over. "Help each other in times of need"? "The spirit of mutual aid"? Who would take such platitudes seriously? They had been received with the utmost respect, but behind every mask of politeness was a snicker and a snort. But somehow, as time went on...those words began to glow. The passage of time weathered away their hackneyed veneer, revealing a golden core.

They glowed because they were the words of Mia Luna Tearmoon, who not only spoke them, but *lived* them. She was first to act in accordance with their principles, setting a resounding example for all who followed.

They glowed because food-aid provided by the Tearmoon Empire saved no small number of lives. True to her word, Mia did not swat away the pleading hands of those in need. She did not forsake a single suffering soul, readily sending material assistance to each and every struggling nation.

Then, others began following her example. At first, it was the nations her friends called home. Then, their neighbors. Eventually, it grew into a massive movement that swept up the whole continent. Ultimately, this enormous current of popular sentiment became the foundation for a certain system. Mia's friend, Chloe Forkroad, would go on to become the driving force behind the development of something known to future generations as the Mianet—a massive network of interlinking channels functioning as an extensive mutual food-aid system that spanned numerous nations and was often credited for the eradication of starvation death from the continent.

The founding principle of the Mianet was that eternally unshakeable Golden Rule professed in the Bread-Cake Declaration, which would be quoted and requoted by thinkers and philosophers of every era afterward.

...It should perhaps be noted that ultimately, Mia had literally just gone up and talked about cakes for her entrance ceremony speech, but no one had faulted her for it.

So, all's well that ends well.

Chapter 9: The Rule of Merchants

To the southeast of the Tearmoon Empire, past a cluster of small nations, lay an enormous port. The independent port city of St. Baleine was a proud and peaceful harbor of the Holy Principality of Belluga. A ceaseless string of feuds between neighboring nations over the harbor's usage rights led to a Belluga intervention, in which they annexed the surrounding lands and opened up the harbor to merchants from all the nearby areas. They then convinced a number of companies to jointly establish a merchant's guild, which was then fully entrusted with the maintenance and development of infrastructure for both the harbor and its town. Belluga had made the town its protectorate, but only in name. The system they put in place ensured that all material benefits were shared with nearby nations.

At first, this move was met with an endless stream of complaints from the neighbors. All the involved actors had been aiming to monopolize the port's economic potential. However, over time, as they began to reap the rewards of Belluga's system, opposing voices died down. Commercial dynamism was a fair blessing in and of itself. The economic calculus of regional players soon realized that the current arrangement might in fact be preferable to sole ownership of the port. Having a fountain of gold in one's own backyard made for a highly conspicuous target; the cost of defending it was not trivial. Having it in *nobody's* backyard could actually save all of them money. Thus flourished the port of peace, which was now one of the continent's most prominent trade centers and widely known as a merchant's paradise.

Standing at this enormous port was Marco Forkroad, who looked up at his company's large-scale merchant ship, the Auro Vangelo, and sighed. "Who would have thought...?"

The ship was bound for a nation far across the sea, where wheat yields were plentiful, and it was heading there under a contract with Mia Luna Tearmoon, princess of the Tearmoon Empire.

"The state of things today... Did the princess see this coming? If she did,

then what a terrifying individual she is...” Marco recalled the face of the princess with whom his daughter had become intimately acquainted. A wry smile spread across his lips, equal parts pride and worry. “Lord almighty, Chloe, just what kind of person did you befriend?”

“Oh? Well, if it isn’t Marco of Forkroad & Co.”

Hearing his name called, Marco turned to find a pot-bellied man with a flamboyantly curled mustache standing before him. The man greeted him with a smile that was awfully wide but undoubtedly only skin-deep. Marco knew him well—this was a man who’d never once put his heart into a smile.

“Ah, Shalloak... Long time no see.”

Shalloak Cornrogue was a wealthy merchant whose sprawling business spanned the entire continent, trading in myriad wares from foodstuffs to silk goods and even weapons. No matter the item or category, if there was money to be made, he was dealing in it. His ruthless profit-focused approach to business was, frankly, something Marco didn’t enjoy being around. Shalloak was an absolutely cutthroat merchant, and that bothered him because he knew Shalloak was *right*. As a merchant, Marco understood that ruthlessness was the correct option. He also understood that it was a quality he himself did not possess.

Well, it *had* bothered him. Now, it was all in the past, because Marco had discovered something more brilliant—more *glorious*—than the correctness of merchant practices could ever be.

How incredibly fascinating. Whenever I was in his presence, I always felt inferior, but now...

He shook his head and produced another sardonic grin.

“Oh ho ho, I know that grin,” said Shalloak as he twirled his mustache. “That’s the grin of someone who just made *absolute fools* of his foes. Well played, my man. To be honest, when you first started dealing in overseas wheat, I thought you’d lost your mind. Folly of the highest order, I remember calling it. And look at you now—that wheat of yours must be worth thrice what you got them for. How does it feel to have shown the rest of us up, hm?”

Marco shrugged. “I appreciate your interest in this matter, but the selling price of the wheat I recently imported was, as a matter of fact, already set beforehand.”

“Oh? And would that be through a contract with the so-called Great Sage of the Empire?” asked Shalloak with a knowing grin.

“How did you—”

“Oh ho ho, but of course I know. Keep an open ear, and rumors will fly in from all sorts of places.”

For merchants, information was a vital weapon. That was why Marco had kept the number of people who knew about his contract with Mia down to an absolute minimum. Yet somehow...

After a period of careful consideration, Marco let out a resigned sigh. “I suppose there’s no point hiding it at this point. As you mentioned, it is indeed a clause in my contract with Her Highness.”

“And you’re intending to abide by this clause? To the word?”

“Naturally. Contracts are sacred and inviolable for us merchants. Are you suggesting that I go back on my promised word?”

“Come now. It’s not a matter of principle; it’s a matter of method. And there are *many* methods. You can, for example, first sell some to a kingdom at a higher price. The empire can come later.”

Marco, who was normally a mild-mannered man, glared at Shalloak. A tinge of anger crept into his voice. “You can’t be serious.”

“And why can’t I? I’ve never been more serious in my life. If anything, this is what defines us as merchants, isn’t it? The only reason we abide by contracts is because it leads to longer-lasting business, which usually results in more profit than the alternative. But if there exists a way to make even more money,” Shalloak said, narrowing his eyes, “then you should be wedging every last piece of wisdom you have into that damn contract to pry open a loophole. The poor harvest from last year has caused wheat prices to spike. You’d be a disgrace if you failed to capitalize on this. We’re merchants, man. The soul of merchanting is loyalty to money. Should the flames of war burn this continent to the ground, we’ll find a way to sell the ashes. *That’s* what being a merchant is about.”

“Lord almighty... I don’t think we’ll ever see eye to eye, Shalloak. I pray that your business continues to thrive. That much, at least, I can offer.”

“And I’ll take it. Every bit helps when you’re running a business, after all.”

Marco spun on his heels and walked off. Shalloak saw him off with a grin that wasn’t entirely friendly.

Chapter 10: Grandmother Mia Is a Passionate Educator

Back at Saint-Noel, ten days had passed after Mia had pontificated during the entrance ceremony about bread and cake. Currently, she was in the library. Was it to look for relevant information that might aid Cyril in his wheat research? No, it was not. She was here to help Bel study.

“I doubt I’ll have much time this summer, so we need to start preparing early for your exams. It’s time for you to do some serious studying.” She was now fully aware of Bel’s questionable academic performance, so she crossed her arms and hardened her heart. Sympathy would not do Bel any good right now.

“Oooooh,” Bel groaned as she pouted with her chin on the table. “Miss Mia has turned into the homework police. There’s still so much time left until the exams...”

“You do realize I get reports from Lynsha, right? You’ve been slacking off recently again, haven’t you?”

“But what is all this studying good for, Miss Mia? Is it useful?” asked Bel, her eyes turned upward toward Mia.

“Of course it is!” Mia declared with chest-puffing confidence. “If you do good in your studies, one day, you’ll be able to give that smug four-eyes an earful— Uh, I mean, go to your academically enthusiastic vassals and get back at them fo— Gah! Look, what I mean is that you’ll be able to impress people, okay? It’ll feel really good.”

Fortunately for Mia, despite her honest thoughts leaking out multiple times, Bel was too busy pouting to notice.

“Reaaaally? Will it really be useful?” she muttered as she reluctantly flipped open her textbook and started reading it.

To her side, Mia set down her own book. Titled *Hundred Mushroom Delicacies*, it was a collection of exotic mushroom recipes from around the world. The author was a renowned adventurer known for his famous motto:

“Poisonous mushrooms: if they don’t kill you, then you can eat ’em!” In other words, he was pretty nuts.

Mia flipped open this crazy man’s book with a pensive look. *Really though. What should I do?*

She couldn’t help but worry. Not about which recipe to make, of course. The source of her concern was Bel. Mia was a reasonable person, after all. Between mushrooms and her granddaughter’s future, the latter mattered more. Just barely though.

Both her dislike of studying and her wasteful spending habits are, at the end of the day, a product of her “I might disappear at any moment” attitude toward life. Her defeatism is ultimately the problem. The fact that Bel thought this way was certainly deserving of sympathy. Mia wasn’t heartless; she felt for the girl. *But I can’t just let her keep frittering away money like this. The guillotine is never far behind... If I’m not careful, it’ll catch up before I know it!*

In her head was a vision of a bipedal guillotine running toward her in the distance, and every gold coin she squandered caused it to dash forward a hundred steps. Tearmoon’s guillotine in particular was known for the speed and length of its stride. She knew that from experience. One way or another, she *needed* to talk Bel out of her habits.

Besides, if Bel is going to continue living in this world, she needs an education. I have to push her to put some more effort into her studies somehow... Granted, if I talked to father, I can probably get him to grant her a peerage and some land. That does seem like it’d be enough to let her live a pretty comfortable life...

But she’d never actually say that out loud. Moons know the girl didn’t need any more excuses not to study. In general, Mia was pretty tolerant toward slacking off, whether it was her or someone else engaged in said activity. When it came to her granddaughter though, for some reason, she just couldn’t let it slide.

I’d be letting down Bel’s mom if I did that... And Bel’s mom is my daughter.

Grandmother Mia was a passionate educator.

“Miss Mia, I don’t get this part.”

“Moons, Bel. All right, which part? Let me see.”

Bel slid her textbook toward Mia, who picked it up.

“Hm.”

A period of throaty contemplation followed.

“Hmmm.”

Then, a period of temple-tapping.

Mia pushed her brain to work harder. Needless to say, Mia’s approach to studying was winning through sheer numbers. Of material memorized, that is. In general, she tried to cram everything testable into her head. Unsurprisingly, this kind of memorization had a fairly short shelf life. Not long after the test was over, most of it would be completely gone. Further complicating things was the fact that Bel was currently studying arithmetic, which was one of Mia’s weaker subjects.

Anne... Where’s Anne?

Before she knew it, Mia found herself looking for her trusty consultant, but the sight of Bel’s glimmering, expectant eyes gave her pause. The unspoken message embedded in those eyes was clear: “Wow, I can’t wait to see how the esteemed Great Sage of the Empire solves this problem!”

“Hm...”

She went back to making thinking noises. Given the circumstances, having Anne solve it instead was simply not an option. She redoubled her book-staring efforts.

No problem. I can do this. With a memory like mine, I can surely...

That’s right. There were some things that Mia simply did not forget. She might forget the endless pages of insipid information she memorized before exams, but never knowledge that was crucial to her survival...and never humiliation that she’d suffered in the past!

I swear that stupid four-eyes had taught me this at some point! What did he say again? Something about how arithmetic is necessary for making deals... Right, that was when we...

If a piece of knowledge could be used as payback against Ludwig, she retained it by doggedly writing it into her diary over and over with a vindictive passion. She *hammered* that stuff into her head.

“Remember this well, Bel. When it comes to questions like these, there will almost always be sample questions next to it. So, you should look at how the sample questions are solved and then apply that to...”

She proceeded to rip off Ludwig almost word-for-word. It was educational plagiarism. And she’d achieved it through what was admittedly

an incredible feat of memorization. In doing so, she looked every bit the wise teacher withholding the answer to encourage her pupil to think for herself. The difference was that wise teachers usually knew the answer. Mia only looked the part. If her pupil legitimately couldn't figure it out, no answer would be forthcoming. Still, she was pretty good at looking the part, so that's something!

"When someone teaches you something, there's no point just memorizing what they said. You have to think about it and understand the principles behind it," said the person who was literally regurgitating stuff she'd memorized without a shred of comprehension.

"Wow, Grandmother Mia's advice is always so deep! Okay, I'll try to figure it out on my own!" said Bel with an earnest nod before taking back her textbook for another attempt.

Mia breathed out a sigh and looked up, at which point she noticed the figure of Chloe with her head down in front of a bookshelf.

"My, Chloe. You're back?"

Forkroad & Co.'s merchant caravan happened to be passing near Saint-Noel, so Chloe had left the island for a while to see her father. Eager to talk to a friend she hadn't seen for a few days, Mia greeted her with a pleasant smile.

"Is Sir Marc— Rather, is your father doing well?"

Chloe didn't respond. She remained still with her head down. Wondering if she didn't hear, Mia got up and walked over.

"...Chloe?"

"Oh! P-Princess Mia..."

This time, Chloe noticed. She turned to face Mia, who promptly frowned at her friend's deeply troubled look.

"Chloe? What's wrong?"

"N-Nothing's wrong..."

"That is *not* the face of someone with nothing wrong. What's with the hesitation? We're book buddies, aren't we? You can be frank with me." Mia took Chloe's hands in hers. "Let's head to my room first, shall we? I think I have some sweets there..."

"Oh, Miss Mia, I can go! Leave it to me! I'll head to the kitchen and have them prepare something!" exclaimed Bel, who eagerly shot up from her seat and dashed out of the library.

Never let it be said that Bel was slow of wit. She seized opportunities as soon as they reared their heads.

Mia pulled Chloe into her room. Inside, they found Anne with a dust cloth in one hand, still in the middle of cleaning.

"Anne, sorry to barge in while you're still cleaning, but Chloe and I are going to have a tea party right now. You can take a break."

"Oh, okay, milady. Then I'll go prepare the tea—"

"No need. Bel's off at the cafeteria fetching it as we speak—"

"I'm back, Miss Mia!" Bel returned right on cue. The sweet smell of hot chocolate wafted from the cups on the tray she held—five cups, to be exact.

"Oh, Bel, I told you tea is fine... Also, five cups? There was just you, me, and Chloe. Why the extras? Did you get some for Anne and Lynsha?"

Anne happened to be here in the room, but Lynsha was not. Mia tilted her head quizzically at the number of cups. Bel grinned.

"The extra one is for my refill, of course!" Bel declared without a lick of shame.

"Bel..." One of the side effects of F.A.T. was jiggliness of the flesh between the shoulder and elbow, so Mia waited for Bel to set the tray down on the table before pinching the girl's upper arm. "Wait, what?!" Her jaw dropped. The jiggliness...wasn't there! She quickly tried her own arm. It was clearly jigglier than Bel's. Such injustice! Refusing to believe the world could be so unfair, she tried again on Bel. To her profound dismay, it only confirmed her previous finding.

"U-Um... Miss Mia? What are you doing?"

"Huh? O-Oh, uh, nothing. Don't mind me. By the way, Bel, are you...exercising or something? When I'm not watching?"

"Huh? Uh... I'm doing the dance practices you taught me. Does that count?"

"Ah... Right. Well, we should start doing those together again. It's about time I took another look to make sure you're practicing properly."

"Okay."

After that unnecessarily roundabout excuse, Mia turned to Chloe. "Anyway, enough digressing. What's bothering you, Chloe?"

Still hesitant, Chloe looked at Mia's face, then down at the cup in her own hands. She said nothing. Mia let out a short sigh and placed a hand on

her chest.

“You’re my friend, Chloe,” she said with a reassuring smile. “And a very precious one at that. If something’s on your mind, I’d like to know. Besides, I can’t even enjoy this wonderful cup of hot chocolate when you look so down.” The veracity of her latter claim notwithstanding, she continued. “I believe an important part of friendship is being frank with each other. So if you think of me as a friend too, then please, talk to me. I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

“P-Princess Mia... Oooh...” Chloe let out a quiet whimper. Like a crack in a dam, it quickly led to an outburst of emotion as her expression twisted with distress. Tears welled behind her glasses. Soon, they were streaming down her face.

“Hm...” Mia nodded as she took out a handkerchief and walked over. “Here. Use this. It’s okay.”

She handed the handkerchief to Chloe and gently patted her back. In that moment, she looked every bit a saint, patient and considerate. Only for that moment though.

“I-I’m so sorry, Princess Mia... I-It’s my father. He... He collapsed and...”

“Huh?” When she pieced together the implications of Chloe’s sobbing confession, Mia froze. Her saintly smile vanished instantly. “Wha— Wait, you can’t be— Huh? Your father? Y-You mean...Sir Marco? He...collapsed?”

Mia almost collapsed on the spot too. And for good reason. Chloe’s father, Marco Forkroad, was the head of Forkroad & Co. With provisions looking ever less sufficient, their company was very literally a lifeline for the empire. If it snapped, it would doubtlessly give Ganudos an opening to maneuver against the empire. There was no way they’d let a chance like that slip by.

Crunch... Crackle... Crunch...

The sound of something approaching echoed in her ears. She spun around, only to see a vision of a cliff...and the unmistakable wooden frame of a guillotine climbing up its precipice toward her.

Eeeeek! No, no, no, no! This is not good!

A sheen of cold sweat formed on her back. She took a long sip of hot chocolate and exhaled. It helped calm her. Then, she fixed Chloe with a serious look.

"Please, tell me the details. What happened?"

Chloe held her gaze for a second, then nodded. "We're actually being attacked by another company. In a business sense, I mean."

She proceeded to tell her story. Someone had mounted an all-out offensive against Forkroad & Co., targeting all the companies that had business relations with them. This someone...was the wealthy merchant Shalloak Cornrogue. As an aggressively hostile competitor, he'd used his commercial clout to destroy every single trade channel the Forkroads managed. In response, Marco ended up working day and night trying to find a way out of this desperate situation, but ultimately succumbed to exhaustion.

"U-Unforgivable. How dare he pick a fight with Chloe's father..." muttered Mia through gritted teeth.

She was visibly shaking with anger at the sheer nerve of this thug of a merchant. Forkroad & Co. had a pivotal role to play in helping the empire survive the famine. In fact, their role had only gotten more pivotal after Mia's big bold promise during the entrance ceremony. With wheat reserves looking worryingly inadequate with this newly inflated demand, she absolutely could not afford to have the Forkroads tap out.

Ugh, merciful moons, this famine is already a code-G situation. I do not *need more problems right now. Who is this punk picking a fight with me?*

That's right... Right now, throwing a punch at Forkroad & Co. was equivalent to throwing a punch at Mia herself. Code-G (for guillotine) was no joke. She was *not* going to take this sitting down.

"Thank you, Chloe," she said with an encouraging nod. "And good for you. I'm glad you talked to me about this, because you came to the right person. I'll handle it."

"Princess Mia..."

"Let's see... First, I should have a chat with Ludwig. I don't know about merchants, but I'm pretty sure he's from a merchant family. He should have some good ideas about how to deal with this situation," Mia murmured. Then, a sinister grin spread across her lips. "Oho ho... Whoever this fellow is...he's going to regret picking a fight with me!"

The day after hearing Chloe's story, Mia promptly began writing a message to Ludwig. "He's probably busy with a lot of stuff, but it's definitely better to have him here." Having decided that this was a class one emergency, she called for her trustiest idea man.

"Hmm... That reminds me. Ludwig was Bel's teacher, wasn't he? I should ask him to give her some arithmetic lessons too. He'll be here for a while anyway. Maybe he'll figure out a good way to teach her."

So, she added "please assist in educating Bel" as an additional instruction to her summons and sent it out. Again, Grandmother Mia was a passionate educator.

Afterward, she prepared to leave the island and headed for the town where Chloe said the Forkroad caravan was parked to make a personal visit to her father. As luck would have it, Marco would be resting there for a while. If Mia wanted to speak to him, now was the time.

As she was leaving, Bel asked, "Um, Miss Mia, can I go too?"

"My, why would you want to do that? I doubt anything interesting is going to happen."

"I want to be there when your heroic feats save the day! That's the kind of thing I'd remember my whole life. I want to see it with my own eyes."

"I highly doubt there will be any swinging, much less hero-ing...but hm, let me think..."

Mia crossed her arms.

Arithmetic and merchants go hand in hand. If she got a good look at actual merchants, maybe it'll motivate her to study more!

Grandmother Mia's passion for education knew no bounds.

"All right then. You're coming along."

So, they left as a pair and headed for the town where the Forkroads were staying.

"Lord almighty, Your Highness... What are you— You didn't have to..."

Marco Forkroad's eyes went wide when Mia stepped into his inn room. He hastily tried to get up from his bed, but she held up her hand to stop him.

"I'm glad to see that you're recovering," she said with a gentle smile. "How are you feeling?"

"You heard from my daughter, then? My deepest apologies," Marco said, lowering his head, "but it's really not that serious. I just worked

myself a little too hard. Nothing that would merit a personal visit from Your Highness."

"Enough with the modesty, Sir Marco. I'm here because I want to be. Your importance to the empire cannot be understated. You are quite literally our lifeline," she replied. Then, her smile grew a little more playful. "Besides, you happen to be the father of a very dear book buddy of mine. If you're not well, then I can't enjoy my discussion sessions with her, and that's no fun at all."

"Your Highness..." Marco bowed deeply toward her. "Your kindness is deeply appreciated."

"If there's anything I can do for you, please tell me. I'm here to help."

"It...really isn't that much of a concern, Your Highness. I'm just dealing with some business difficulties."

"I heard someone's trying to sabotage you, though. Were you attacked? Did they resort to violence? Don't tell me they hired bandits or something..."

"No, no, it's nothing like that," said Marco, hastily shaking his head.

Mia regarded him with a puzzled frown.

Just then... "Sir Marco, Her Highness is a wise and perceptive person. I strongly believe that it would be to your benefit to describe the particulars of your company's current situation." A familiar voice floated into the room. Mia turned to find the figure of her loyal subject in the doorway.

"Ah, Ludwig. I'm glad you made it," she said in a delighted voice. She was starting to feel like she wouldn't make any progress with Marco alone, so knowing that her cavalry had arrived was deeply reassuring.

"I'm terribly sorry to have made you wait, Your Highness." Ludwig bent at the waist in a deep bow. Then, he turned to Marco. "Now then... Should you find it difficult to speak frankly about the details of your business, it may be easier for me to state my inferences instead, in which case I ask that you simply listen for the moment."

He put a finger to his glasses.

"First, allow me to clear up a misconception that Her Highness just mentioned. While conflict between merchants may at times involve the hiring of bandits and direct acts of violence, it is not at all a common occurrence. When it comes to large companies like Forkroad & Co., it's practically unheard of."

Mia tilted her head. “My, is that so?”

“Yes, because clear wrongdoing will be punished accordingly. The victim of a criminal act has the right to request government intervention. Furthermore, large-scale companies tend to have defensive measures in place. Direct violence is therefore a poor approach that not only incurs great risk but is also easily thwarted.”

“I see. That makes sense.”

“Merchants have channels of attack that are unique to their field. Let me think of an example... Ah, an easy one to understand would be striking at a rival through market competition by excessively lowering prices,” Ludwig said as he adjusted his glasses.

His explanation elicited a pained grimace from Marco.

“Huh? Lowering prices?” asked a puzzled Bel.

Ludwig glanced at her and chuckled. “I see that was too difficult a concept for Miss Bel to grasp. Hm...” He pondered in silence for some time before continuing. “How about this then? Miss Bel, imagine that you see two pastry items being sold. They taste the same and are the same size, but one costs one copper while the other costs two. Which would you buy?”

“Huh? Well, the one that costs one copper, I guess.”

“Correct. As a customer, that is the natural conclusion. You would buy the cheaper one. That is why, by lowering your prices below that of an enemy merchant and making people buy *your* products instead of theirs, you can impair their business. This is a basic technique in the world of merchant warfare.”

For a bit of perspective, what Ludwig spoke of was common sense. Even Mia understood what he was talking about.

“When this technique is taken to malicious extremes, it’s possible to completely disregard profit margins altogether and sell products at unreasonably low prices. Something acquired for one silver can, for example, be sold for one copper.”

“Huh? But what’s the point of doing that? You’d just be losing money.”

Ludwig shook his head gravely. “The point—and it’s a very good point—is that a wealthy merchant with enough financial muscle can crush all his rivals...and monopolize the market.”

While Ludwig was giving Bel his Business 101 lecture, Mia munched on the sweets Marco had set out. *Hm... I’ve never seen this kind before. I*

wonder if he obtained these overseas? This black paste seems to be made from beans, and there's this...refreshingly sweet taste to it. I feel like this would go really well with some cream.

Clearly, Mia the Sweets Connoisseur hadn't lost her touch.

"And once he establishes a monopoly, meaning he's the only one selling the product in question," Ludwig continued, "he's free to set the price as he pleases. It can't be bought anywhere else, after all. He can make it as expensive as he wants."

"Oh, I get it now!" Bel clapped her hands together in a moment of understanding. Ludwig's careful explanation had borne fruit. Nevertheless, he glanced at Mia for confirmation.

"Mmm..."

Seeing that she was nodding contently while nibbling on a sweet, Ludwig exhaled with relief, figuring she was satisfied by his performance. *I see. She saw a learning opportunity in this situation for Miss Bel and wished to take advantage of it.*

Her message to him requesting his presence had included the line: "Please assist in educating Bel." Presumably, she wanted Bel to learn how to deal with merchants.

Ludwig continued his explanation. "In this particular case, however, I suspect the objective is not to monopolize the market but to mount a direct attack against your company. Furthermore, the method being employed is—if I were to guess—a hijacking of Forkroad & Co.'s market through severe undercutting. Am I correct?"

Marco slumped a little and shook his head in surrender. "I see it's no use trying to hide anything from you. But how did you know? Was it truly that obvious?"

Ludwig smirked. "My apologies. I may have indulged in a bit of showmanship. In truth, there's a piece of information that aided me in my reasoning." He turned to Mia. "I was contacted by Shalloak Cornrogue with a request to terminate our business relationship with Forkroad and sign a new contract with his company." He then produced a letter from his pocket and handed it to her. "The details are written here, but in short, he's offering to transport wheat at larger volumes and lower prices than Forkroad."

In other words, Shalloak was making it clear that his antagonism was toward Forkroad and not the empire. The conditions he was offering were

quite generous as well—enough to make terminating Forkroad's contract a viable alternative. That alone was reason for caution.

If something sounds too good to be true, it usually is, Ludwig thought. *Moreover, the crux of this offer is an attempt to make us break faith with Forkroad. Chances are, Her Highness will refuse to partake in such a betraying act.*

And that was exactly why the offer impressed Ludwig. It was exceedingly cunning. By severely undercutting all of Forkroad's products on the market—even if it did result in significant losses—Shalloak had effectively choked off the company's entire business. Forkroad couldn't sell anything right now...except for one item—wheat. Specifically, the wheat that was supposed to be delivered directly to Tearmoon. With profits plummeting and demand for wheat so high, could Forkroad resist the urge to touch the empire-bound supply? By selling the wheat to other buyers for more than the contract-stated price, the company might yet survive. All it would require was some deception. If Forkroad were to succumb to temptation and violate their promise...they'd be the ones who broke faith first, thereby giving the empire a perfect excuse to terminate their contract.

Fortunately, Sir Marco has held true to his word. The contract remains unbreached, which allows Her Highness to repay his loyalty in good faith. It was the knowledge of Marco's fidelity that led Ludwig to divulge the contents of Shalloak's letter to him.

"Interesting... Hm, Cornrogue?" said Mia quizzically as she read over the letter. "Well, I do wonder..."

The sight of Mia's pursed-lip contemplation led Marco to rise in a panic. "Y-Your Highness, that's—"

"Please, Sir Marco," she said, calmly gesturing for him to sit back down. "Relax. I'm not going to betray my book buddy for money. It's just that this Shalloak fellow... His last name is Cornrogue, is it?"

Her meditative voice prompted Ludwig to ask, "Have you heard of him before, Your Highness?"

Mia's gaze grew distant. "I...certainly have. I remember him *very* well. The Merchant King, Cornrogue. I thought it'd be a little while longer before he showed up... So *he's* coming to *me*, is he? Oho ho..." She grinned like a child planning a prank. "Oh, on that note, Ludwig, since the Forkroads are being harassed right now, isn't there anything we can do to help? Have the

empire buy up the goods they have in stock, for example."

The fact of the matter was that Shalloak Cornrogue wasn't picking a fight with the empire. He was ultimately just fighting a pricing war with Forkroad & Co. The most the empire could do to help, then, was to purchase Forkroad's dead inventory.

"Good question. Let me think..." said Ludwig. His mind worked furiously as he tried to determine the correct answer—not the answer to whether a buyout was appropriate, but what Mia had *actually meant* by asking this question.

As if leading him on, Mia continued. "Or would buying leftover goods from a company just because the owner is my friend's father be a form of wasteful spending? Am I going to get scolded if I buy things at a higher price when they can be gotten cheaper somewhere else?"

She glanced up at Ludwig. Her probing expression confirmed to him that his guess was correct. *As I thought, Her Highness has already made up her mind on what to do. These questions are entirely performative. She's simply going through the motions right now to educate Miss Bel.*

He nodded back at her with a knowing look and said, "I see no issue in doing so. Even if cheaper products exist elsewhere, so long as the price of the more expensive item is *appropriate*, then purchasing it would not be wasteful spending."

"Really? Why is that, Professor Ludwig? Can you teach me? Please?" Bel looked up at him with pleading eyes.

As expected, that had gotten Bel's attention. He smiled with satisfaction at her curious expression and answered, "Of course I will. There is no need to plead. Let me see... How should I explain this? Hm... The belief that everything is better when it's cheaper is, in my opinion, a mistake. The reason for this is that money is compensation for labor. In other words, it represents the value of that labor."

"'The value of labor'?" Bel parroted.

Ludwig nodded deeply. "Behind every item a merchant sells is the work of someone who made it. Crops come from farmers. Craftwork, from artisans. Cuisine, from chefs. They're all the product of labor. The act of putting a price on a product is therefore the process of valuing the labor that went into it."

The increasing complexity of the topic pulled Bel's brows up into a

frown. It was apparent that she was having trouble following the logic...yet it was also apparent that she was still trying. The sight of her face scrunched up into an expression of intense mental effort was endearing, and Ludwig couldn't help but smile.

"Merchants must therefore price their products in a way that respects the labor behind it. The way I see it, selling things too cheaply devalues labor, and henceforth insults the effort of those who made it."

While explaining his point, Ludwig's smile grew wry. He remembered how his own father used to lecture him about the same thing. *Merchants must not lower prices beyond the limit of their own capabilities. Doing so just to compete with a rival merchant does a great disservice to the producers of their goods... It's just as he said.* It made him recognize anew the truth contained in his father's words. He turned to the visibly ruminating Bel.

"The injury of such behavior extends beyond the psychological. There is physical harm done as well. For example, suppose there is a merchant who took cookies that cost two silver to make and sold them for one silver. He would end up with a deficit of one silver, but it might be worth the loss to draw more customers to him. However, now that he's doing this, what would other merchants think? They'd be losing their customers to him. Would they also lower their price to one silver to draw them back?"

Bel, listening intently with her face scrunched up in concentration, answered frankly, "Yes, I think they would."

"It seems plausible, doesn't it? But actually, it's likely that no one else would be willing to sell at a loss. They *would* try to lower the price though. How? By asking the ones who made the product to work harder. The merchants would go to their cookie supplier and claim that the cookies won't sell for two silvers, so they need to be made cheap enough to sell for one silver. In order to compete with the first merchant, the other merchants would try to devalue the labor of craftsmen."

"I see... Does that mean that merchants who ask craftsmen to do unreasonable things are bad people?"

"That's certainly true, but I believe that irresponsible customers who purchase cheap goods without giving the price any thought are also partially responsible. The frustrating part—and what makes this a particularly difficult dilemma—is that laborers prefer lower-priced goods as well. They

receive wages for their work, then use those wages to buy things, making them customers. By seeking out cheap products, they end up diminishing the value of their own labor."

Ludwig paused to allow his explanation to sink in. Then, he continued again. "That's why, in my personal opinion, between a merchant who prices his products appropriately and one whose prices are excessively low, the former is more trustworthy. Merchants lower prices because customers find more value in cheap products, but one should not blindly pursue the lowest-costing choice. What customers should recognize is that this world is not so convenient as to allow them to value their own labor highly while devaluing that of everyone else."

Finally, he turned to Mia.

"Therefore, I believe it's appropriate to go ahead with the purchase you speak of, so long as it does not include any luxury items with no utility or unreasonably expensive goods. It will also help mitigate any distorting effects on the circulation of money."

After nodding in satisfaction at Ludwig's impromptu thesis on market dynamics, Mia shifted her gaze toward Marco Forkroad. "And there you have it, Sir Marco. We shall purchase your remaining inventory at the appropriate market price. If the empire has difficulty producing the funds, hm... Well, I'll just ask some of my friends for assistance. There's no need to lower your prices excessively just because they're leftovers. Let us deal in good faith and mutual respect."

With that, she smiled.

Chapter 11: Despite Overeating, She Still...

The Merchant King, Shalloak Cornrogue, had built up a vast amount of wealth during the great famine. While the continent's people suffered, he'd managed to turn disaster into opportunity, eventually going so far as to call himself a king.

Mia had met the man before. This encounter had occurred in the previous timeline, when the empire was beginning to crumble under the crushing weight of the famine. Together with Ludwig, she'd set out on a journey to seek assistance, and this man was one of the potential sources.

Financial pressures had manifested themselves in the carriage they took, which was now considerably less luxurious. It also conveyed the bumpiness of the road far more faithfully.

"Was there seriously no better carriage we could have taken?" Mia grumbled as she rubbed her tender buttocks. "One that doesn't *assault* its rider like this?"

"It costs money to maintain non-assaultive carriages. Money that you might have noticed we're *lacking* right now." Ludwig's merciless rebuttal stuffed the rest of her complaints back down her throat. She scowled darkly at him. "Feel free to glower at me as much as you wish, but I implore you to put on an agreeable face when we're in front of our potential business partner."

"Yes, yes, I know. What was the fellow called again? Merchant King Cornrogue? That's a pretty pretentious name..."

"It certainly is. To be honest, he's not the kind of person I like asking favors of... Debts with his type tend to accumulate interest."

"My, coming from a four— Ahem. Coming from you, that's quite the comment. He must be pretty bad."

"For the millionth time, Your Highness, you really should stop calling me that. It's not language befitting your station." Ludwig shook his head

and shrugged wearily, clearly used to having his admonishment ignored. Then, his expression turned serious again. “But seriously, do be careful around him. The man built up a veritable empire of wealth in a single generation. And I mean that literally—he’s richer than some kings. I suspect he’s going to be quite the *eccentric* one.”

“We’re good to go then. After all, I have plenty of experience with eccentric people.” Mia eyed him and smiled.

To their mutual dismay, the meeting that day would prove futile. They weren’t even taken seriously, suffering not only disappointment but the humiliation of being effectively turned away at the door.

The carriage stopped at a village near the empire’s border. Mia and Ludwig stepped out and followed the directions they’d been given. Expecting to be led to an inn or tavern where they’d hold their meeting, they instead found another carriage. This was Shalloak’s personal coach, and it was *luxurious*. Stepping in, Mia couldn’t help but ogle its resplendent interior decor, which was every bit the equal of how her private room in the Whitemoon Palace had once looked.

“What a gorgeous carriage this is, Mr. Cornrogue,” said Mia, greeting the owner of the vehicle. “‘Merchant King’ indeed.”

Shalloak Cornrogue twirled his curly mustache and smiled. “I’m glad it pleases you, Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon. Your approval is no small honor. It makes all the money I spent on this thing worth it.”

“Yes, it’s very much fit for a king,” said Mia, voicing her honest thoughts.

She’d intended the phrase to be a casual compliment, but Shalloak’s smile gained a snarky edge. “But not, I assume, for a lowly merchant who has the audacity to call himself one? Does it offend you for me to be called a king? Me, who has no citizens, army, or land. The name Merchant King must seem unbearably pretentious to you.” He was dead-on. So much so that it left her fumbling for words. The sight amused him, and he chuckled. “I get the same reaction from everyone. But know this—I *am* a king. However high and mighty you aristocrats are, I am equally so.”

He stood up and reached into a nearby bag, from which he withdrew a handful of objects. “*These* are my subjects. They are my army. My soldiers and forts. My fields and livestock. The source of my wealth. And the god I

worship.” Holding his hand before her palm down, he released his grip. The objects fell to the ground, scattering haphazardly at her feet in a cacophony of metallic clinks. She glanced down, eyes drawn by their aureate glow.

“My... Are these...gold coins?”

“Yes. Gold is our idol. This is the power that governs the world. Simple, right?”

“R-Right... I suppose so...”

Mia fought hard to keep up a smile through Shalloak’s theatrics. Despite her best efforts, her cheeks twitched. The Merchant King, meanwhile, paid her no mind and plunked casually back down on his seat—no, his *throne*. “Good.” He grinned. “Let’s hear it then, Princess Mia. What, pray tell, do you seek from my kingdom?”

“Uh, well...we were wondering if you could help us with something...”

Mia shot a sideward glance at Ludwig, who picked up where she left off. “Our empire is currently in need of foodstuffs. We’d like to purchase a supply of wheat from you.”

“Wheat? Of course. I certainly have wheat for sale. But do you have the money to pay for it?”

Shalloak handed him a piece of parchment. On it was written the selling price of wheat. When Ludwig saw the number, he let out a choking sound. Mia, in her curiosity, took a peek, only to have the same reaction.

“Wh-What?!” She stared at the price in shock. “Huh? How?! Wheat can’t possibly be this expensive! This is price gouging!” Mia’s furious complaints bounced impotently off Shalloak, who smiled at her with a vexing amount of composure.

“With all due respect, Princess Mia, that is how the world works. When the number of people who want something increases, so does its price.”

“But this is *too* much! It’s way, way more than it should be. We’re not trying to build a castle here.”

“Indeed you are not. In fact, no one is. All this means is that we live in a time where wheat is more in-demand than castles. You can’t eat castles, after all. Bah ha ha.” He chortled at his own joke before picking up a cookie from a nearby snack tray. Mia’s eyes became glued on the tasty-looking treat, following it from the tray into his mouth. “Mmmm. Perhaps you’re too young to understand this, but the world runs on money. Money is power. Money is my god, and I’m an ardent believer. I pray to it. Pour my

faith into it. And I ask it to bring more of itself to me. Therefore, so long as you have money, I'm willing to do whatever you ask of me."

Mia gnashed her teeth and growled, which wasn't a very productive reply, so Ludwig answered instead. "Fine, we'll pay. We only ask that you wait for us to procure the funds. The empire is currently in a difficult situation, but once we pull through, I promise that we'll reimburse you for the wheat."

"Promise, you say? You can promise me the world, and it still won't be worth a penny. I have no need for empty words. If your empire were well on its way to recovery, then perhaps some consideration would be possible, but it's no mystery why Tearmoon's finances are in tatters. The only reason I agreed to this meeting today was to see if there's anything I could squeeze out of your empire before it collapsed for good, but..." Shalloak glanced pointedly at Mia and shrugged. "Judging by your carriage and that cheap dress the princess is wearing... I'm clearly too late. Oh, but that hairpin of yours is a fine item." His smile suddenly took on a different color. "I'd be willing to trade you a box of cookies for it—"

"Enough. This is ridiculous." Ludwig shot down his offer before Mia's resolve had the chance to falter at the allure of cookies. "People are *starving*. They're *dying*. People are the pillars of a nation. It's their work that props up society. We need a healthy populace. You're a merchant. Surely, you do too."

"Ludwig, was it? Hah. I see that you're a man of loyalty. And you've got a heart of gold to boot. I can tell that you truly wish to save your people from starvation. I have no doubt you're an exceptionally competent man, Ludwig, but unfortunately, you don't seem to have the makings of a good merchant."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean...is that it's difficult to extract the gold in one's heart. Your compassion might make you a wise and virtuous person, but it won't make you rich. You need to see the pain and suffering of others as chances to make money. Sometimes, even their deaths. *Everything* is a business opportunity. That's the creed you must subscribe to if you wish to be an adherent of the golden lord." Shalloak leaned back and shrugged. "In other words, Ludwig, I couldn't care less how many people in Tearmoon starve. As I'm sure you're aware, this famine won't kill every last person on the

continent. The question, therefore, is how to make the most money from this situation. Granted, you can't do business with dead bodies, so I won't let the whole nation perish, but setting aside profit to save every living soul is not business. It's charity."

"Oooh you've done it now!" said Mia, piping up. "I heard you loud and clear! When I tell Miss Rafina about what you just said, I think she'll be rather upset."

"Go ahead. Tell her all about it. We'll see whose word the world chooses to believe. That of an unpopular princess, or a known philanthropist who has already invested in a track record of giving money to charitable activities. I'm quite eager to find out which of our images will win out in the end. It'll make for an amusing diversion." He scoffed at her.

"Hnnnngh." Mia gnashed her teeth. "If you think you can solve everything by throwing money at it... Well, you'd better think again!"

"Princess Mia, if I may be so bold, allow me to offer you one piece of advice. Don't be a sore loser. It only makes you look worse." He looked down his nose at her with what almost felt like pity. "Now then, if you have no other matters to discuss, then please leave. I'm a busy man, and I have many more important matters to attend to."

...They'd been effectively turned away at the door.

I'll have you know, I haven't forgotten the humiliation I suffered that day... Well, I mean, I guess I did forget, but I ate some food and it all came back to me, so it's fine! Also, this sweet bean paste is absolutely delicious! Not that it matters right now, but it is!

Feeling her anger rise again, Mia took another bite of the pastry. Its sweetness pushed the wave of resentment back down, allowing her to keep a clear head.

Hmm, what should I do next? That's the question. For the time being, I should tell Sir Marco to sell us some of these sweet bean— Oh wait, in order to do that, I have to save his company first. And if I want to save his company...I might have to fight that Shalloak fellow?

According to Ludwig, Shalloak's antagonism was directed specifically at Forkroad & Co. His attitude toward the empire was, if anything, positive and eager to do business. That made it difficult for them to throw the first punch.

Chloe looks downright miserable, so I can't afford to just stand by and watch... Nor do I want to, honestly. This whole thing rubs me the wrong way. In that case...

Mia turned to Ludwig. "Ludwig," she asked, "since the Forkroads are being harassed right now, isn't there anything we can do to help? Have the empire buy up the goods they have in stock, for example."

Their enemy was willing to lose money to stop the Forkroads from selling their goods. What they needed to do, then, was to prevent the "Forkroads can't sell anything" situation from occurring.

Oho ho, now this *is what I call two birds with one stone. We'll be helping the Forkroads while also sticking it to that bast— I mean, that unpleasant man. When he realizes his plans were ruined... Oooh, I'm looking forward to tasting his frustration. I bet it'll be delicious.*

One problem remained, though. She wasn't sure whether this idea would constitute wasteful spending. She glanced inquiringly at Ludwig.

"Or would buying leftover goods from a company just because the owner is my friend's father be a form of wasteful spending? Am I going to get scolded if I buy things at a higher price when they can be gotten cheaper somewhere else?"

Her heart beat a nervous rhythm as she awaited his answer. Yes? No? What would it be? The hair on the back of her neck stood in anticipation. She gulped. Feeling a dryness in her mouth, she reached for her remedy—another pastry!

She was definitely overeating.

"I see no issue in doing so."

Feeling a wave of relief wash over her, she reached for her reward—only to be thwarted by Anne.

She'd *already* overeaten.

Hm. I suppose it's important to observe the principle of moderation in all matters. It's the same as what Ludwig is talking about right now. It's important to have an appropriate price for products, just like how it's important to eat an appropriate amount of sweets. Yes, it all makes sense now.

This thought of hers would sound far more convincing if she wasn't already guilty of overeating. Regardless, she continued.

"And there you have it, Sir Marco. We shall purchase your remaining

inventory at the appropriate market price. If the empire has difficulty producing the funds, hm... Well, I'll just ask some of my friends for assistance. There's no need to lower your prices excessively just because they're leftovers. Let us deal in good faith and mutual respect."

"B-But...Your Highness, I can't possibly ask you to—"

"Sir Marco, not long ago, there was an entrance ceremony at Saint-Noel Academy. During the ceremony, I spoke of the importance of the spirit of mutual aid. You've been helping us, so now, it's only natural that I repay the favor." She paused for a moment of thought, then added, "And this is for Chloe too. So if you feel like you owe me something, then consider our debts settled, because I'll be borrowing your daughter extensively. Her time is payment enough."

Chloe was an invaluable book buddy. Mia was looking forward to spending a lot more time with her throughout the rest of her school life, so maintaining a good relationship was essential. As a closing remark, "Her time is payment enough" was perhaps on the triter side, but it got the job done.

A few days later, Marco heard from Chloe the details of Mia's speech during the entrance ceremony. The words of the eventually-to-be-famed Bread-Cake Declaration caused his thoughts to stir. As he pondered its meaning, he considered her subsequent actions, as well as her desire to "borrow his daughter extensively," and...put two and two together! Into three! Or maybe five! But whatever it was, it sure wasn't four, because he felt like he finally comprehended Mia's true intentions, and everyone knows where that feeling leads.

In her entrance ceremony speech, he saw the inklings of a continent-spanning mutual food-aid network. Her statement about borrowing Chloe, then, had been a request for assistance. She wanted Chloe to help her make this grand vision a reality. *That* was why Mia had come to him.

"Ha ha, Lord almighty, what have you gotten yourself into, Chloe...? This is going to be the project of the century," he whispered in awe.

It made him worried. It also made him immensely proud. When this endeavor of the Great Sage of the Empire took off, Chloe would be right there with her doing great things for the world.

"Well, I can hardly sit around and twiddle my thumbs while my

daughter's off solving world hunger. I'd better get back on my feet and do my part to help."

And so, little by little, the way was paved for the creation of the Mianet.

Chapter 12: A Modicum of Payback — Groundwork—

"By the way, Your Highness," said Ludwig, "I have no problems declining this offer from Shalloak, but how would you like to go about doing it?"

"Hm? What do you mean by 'go about doing it?'" Mia gave Ludwig a puzzled look.

"Would you like to send a messenger? Or tell him in person?"

"Ah, that's what you mean." She considered her options. "Oho ho... Since he's the one who brought it up, let's make him come to us."

There was plenty she wanted to say to him. The thought of doing so to his face put a devious smile on hers. Having gone to the trouble of visiting him in the previous timeline only to be turned away at the door, she was going to take what he'd said to her then and throw it right back at him. It was going to be her way of getting a modicum of payback!

"I believe that would be the best option as well, especially considering he might very well be connected to the Serpents."

"The Serpents? Huh..." She nodded. It hadn't occurred to her, but it was certainly possible. This whole affair could be another one of their nefarious schemes. However... "True. I suppose we do need to investigate that possibility a little more carefully." ...In truth, she wasn't too worried about Shalloak being a Serpent. She wasn't sure why, but the man just didn't seem like the order-destroying type.

He's more like...a money addict. Or maybe a crazy cultist. The way he worships money is sort of fanatical, after all. Her instincts told her that he probably wasn't a Serpent.

"I'll send for him then. While preparations are underway, I'll remain here in Belluga."

"That's wonderful. You'll be a great help." She nodded and folded her arms. "Hm... With that said, I should do a proper background check on the

man.”

And so she did.

Though Shalloak’s business was based in the exclave port city of St. Baleine, he hadn’t been born in Belluga. His homeland was west of St. Baleine in the Kingdom of Miranada. A small kingdom dwarfed by even Remno, never mind Tearmoon, Miranada was nevertheless rich for its size. The source of its wealth was none other than the commercial activity that flowed out of bustling St. Baleine. As a result, merchants enjoyed a relatively high degree of social esteem in Miranada.

“I was planning to say some pretty mean things to his face, but I need to look into what connections he has. Just to be safe.”

If it turned out that Shalloak was cozy with powerful nobles from Miranada or other nations, it’d surely become a problem down the road. Fortunately, there were Miranada natives in Saint-Noel. She should just ask one of them.

“Hm, Miranada natives, Miranada natives... I vaguely remember Ludwig mentioning someone before...”

Before starting school in Saint-Noel Academy, Mia had done some groundwork networking. Specifically, she’d been looking for potential targets to suck up to so when she had to skedaddle, she’d have a place to go. Among the nations she’d researched, the Kingdom of Miranada had been a prospective place of asylum. The fact that it had a port was appealing. If she could use that to escape abroad, she’d be spared the flames of Tearmoon’s revolution.

As an aside, after being told to see if anyone had connections with Miranada, Ludwig had murmured “So at last, Her Highness seeks a port...” to himself in a voice of awe—the usual Ludwig conjecturing.

“If I remember correctly, there should be a few young nobles around here who fit the bill...”

Her musing led her to an upper-years’ classroom, where she asked for the whereabouts of those who’d been born in Miranada.

“Those three? I think they went to one of the lower-years’ classrooms,” answered one of the students.

Following the lead, she went to the lower years, where she found some vaguely familiar faces.

“My, aren’t you...”

“Eeep!” Three boys turned to look at her and jumped at their first glance. Between them was a girl, who looked like she didn’t want to be there. Mia couldn’t quite remember where she’d seen the boys, so she examined the girl. Her hair was matte gray, and her deep-green eyes darted about nervously. All in all, she gave off the kind of aww-so-cute aura that small animals often exuded. It made Mia want to pat her head. The boys surrounding her, meanwhile, now looked even jumpier than her.

Mia eyed each of them in turn. “You boys... Don’t tell me you were bullying her?”

“N-No, definitely not! There was no bullying here whatsoever!”

They were, in fact, the exact same boys who’d just gotten a good scolding from her a few days ago in the hallway. Their victim was the same girl too.

“Really. Then what were you doing?”

“W-We were following your order, President Mia, and protecting her!”

That reminded her—she had indeed mentioned something to that effect. She looked at the girl. “And you? Were you really not being bullied? Uh, your name is...”

“It’s Tatiana, um...President Mia. I really appreciate your help earlier. Thanks to you, they’ve been protecting me like this ever since.”

“Ah. That’s good then.” Mia nodded, though she slightly pitied the girl. Being encircled by a trio of older boys all day like this didn’t seem comfortable.

“B-By the way, President Mia, what brings you here today?” asked one of the boys.

She clapped her hands together, remembering her original mission. “Oh, right, I almost forgot! There’s something I want to ask you. You were all born in Miranada, right? Do you know of a merchant from your kingdom? He’s called Shalloak Cornrogue.”

“Shalloak Cornrogue? Oh, you mean Money-Grubber Shalloak...” said one of the boys, who scowled in disgust.

Mia arched an eyebrow. That was a rather unflattering title. “I heard that he’s done a lot of things and gotten quite rich off them. I assume he has plenty of connections with nobles as well?”

After some questioning, she learned that though Shalloak was not

entirely disconnected from nobility, none of his contacts were worthy of her concern. For better or worse, most of his relationships seemed entirely transactional, rooted only in monetary gain. None of his acquaintances seemed likely to take his side if it came at the cost of incurring the empire's disfavor.

It'd be a problem if he were cozy with bigwigs in Sunkland or Belluga, but that doesn't seem to be the case. I think I'm clear to snark about him to my heart's content. And to his face, at that!

She was too busy putting on her best evil grin to notice a change in Tatiana's expression.

"...Master Shalloak Cornrogue?"

Nor did she hear the small whisper that escaped the girl's lips.

After concluding her extensive intelligence-gathering operation (it took an hour, tops), snarfing down some snacks, rolling around in bed (for a good week or so), and engaging in various other forms of idle pastimes, a message from Ludwig arrived, informing her that Shalloak was on his way. She immediately began making her way to the town where Ludwig was currently staying.

As planned, she got there a day before Shalloak's arrival, allowing her and Ludwig plenty of time for advance preparations. In order to welcome him appropriately—that is, exact revenge for what he did that day—she booked a room in an inn to stay the night. The small town had nothing close to luxury lodging, and it took some work to persuade the poor innkeeper to give her the room, who kept apologizing profusely for how he "can't possibly accommodate someone like Your Highness here." In the end, she got the job done by assuring him that as long as he was running a clean, normal business, then there would be nothing to worry about. What Mia cared the most about was whether the inn had a bathing facility. Fortunately, it did, and she enjoyed a restorative dip before turning in for the night.

Rested and ready, the next day she greeted Shalloak upon his arrival and showed him to her room at the inn. It wasn't very spacious, and a number of people were already inside. Ludwig stood beside Mia. At her other flank was Anne. Bel, who'd asked to be brought along so she could witness Mia's heroic feats, tucked herself into a corner of the room for spectating purposes.

“First, allow me to thank you for making the long journey here.” With a smile that exuded composure, Mia stood up and curtsied gracefully. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Mia Luna Tearmoon, princess of the Tearmoon Empire.”

She greeted him with a self-introduction that was courteous beyond reproach. The last time she’d visited him, he hadn’t even bothered to get up. With all the haughtiness of a king greeting a serf, he’d greeted her while lounging on his throne. Mia, however, was different. True majesty need not flaunt itself; bluff and bluster would only demean its inherent dignity. Au contraire, it was the diligent adherence to protocol and decorum that accentuated one’s exalted nature. So Mia conducted herself with the utmost stateliness, as if juxtaposing the crassness of his past performance.

Oho ho, I can hardly wait. This is going to be so much fun!

On the inside, she was anything but composed. She could barely contain her excitement. There were so many choice words she wanted to spew at him. So eager was she to get the conversation rolling that despite the plan to take the laid-back wait-and-see approach, she ended up introducing herself first!

“Ah, what an honor it is to be greeted so warmly. My name is Shalloak Cornrogue, and the pleasure is all mine, Your Highness.”

He took a knee, which she acknowledged with a nod. “Please, take a seat. There’s no rush, so let us begin by enjoying some tea.”

She gestured for a tea set, along with an assortment of tea cakes. Specifically, it was a collection of the finest Perujin cookies she’d asked Rania to prepare for her. In the previous timeline, Shalloak hadn’t offered her so much as a crumb, but Mia was different. She was going to show him how utterly superior she was by crushing him through the sheer weight of her generosity. In no way was she motivated by petty considerations such as avoiding Anne’s admonishments of overeating by framing her snacking as a gesture of courtesy for their guest. That would be slander.

“I must say, though,” said Shalloak, “I’m surprised that the princess of Tearmoon is staying in such a...” He glanced around the room, only to trail off when he noticed something in Mia’s hair. “Excuse my curiosity, but you seem to be wearing a fascinating hairpin.”

“Oh, this?” She smiled and pulled it from her hair. “It’s made from a beautiful species of tree called the ‘Unicorn’s Horn’ that grows in one of the

empire's forests."

"Ah. A tree. I see." His interest visibly dropped a notch.

Mia smiled sweetly at him. "Does it seem strange to you?" she asked with a soft chuckle. "That the princess of a mighty empire like me is wearing a wooden hairpin? Also, you didn't finish your earlier sentence, but let me venture a guess—you find it bizarre that I'd choose to stay in an inn like this. Am I correct?"

Shalloak's eyes widened a little. "You're right on the money. Indeed, a dinky little inn like this hardly befits someone of your caliber. I worry about the rumors it might spread. It would be a stain on your good name. Wouldn't your carriage be preferable compared to a place like this? Forgive me if I'm being presumptuous, but I noticed the vehicle Your Highness has parked out front, and the craftsmanship is superb. Now *that* is a coach lavish enough for a princess."

His comment elicited a smile of satisfaction from Mia. "The carriage is nice, yes, but it doesn't have a bath."

"...I'm sorry?"

Shalloak frowned in confusion.

"This inn, meanwhile, has a *very* good bath. One of the best, even. Enjoying a good soak in its warmth followed by a refreshing gulp of spring water is an experience few pleasures can best." Belluga was known for its abundant sources of water, boasting springs so pristine that it was rumored people could become beautiful just by drinking from them. "If you seek the best that a place has to offer, then naturally, you must stay in its inns and speak to its people. That's how it works, isn't it? Only true locals can guide you to true treasures."

Indeed, Mia knew the golden rule of pleasure-seeking: keep an open mind. In Tearmoon grew Tearmoon's mushrooms. In Belluga, Belluga's mushrooms. In Remno, Remno's. It was pure folly to travel to foreign lands and still blindly assume that the best cuisine consisted of only the mushrooms one knew from back home. Local dishes were best made with local mushrooms. Therefore, peak pleasure came from the constant pursuit of the best mushrooms that grew in the present location.

The principle of fungal fulfillment applied more broadly as well. Her carriage was certainly luxurious, but dismissing a local inn for its familiar comfort would be ignorance of the highest degree, a sign of extreme

narrow-mindedness. Likewise, evaluating the value of all things through the measure most familiar to oneself—money—was equally foolish. And that latter point was what she was really trying to get across.

"Also, regarding this hairpin... It was given to me by a certain child who made it himself. It's one of my favorites, because it was crafted with affection and care," said Mia. She quietly closed her eyes. "I have no need for hair ornaments whose only worth is in how much they cost. After all, I am in a position that allows me to decide the value of things for myself."

Faced with this proud declaration, Shalloak shrank a little.

"I...see," he said, slightly overawed. "Th-That's a splendid way of looking at things. I expected nothing less from Your Highness. So, does this mean you're willing to accept my offer?"

"Offer? Oh... That thing."

"Yes. I tried my best to make it as generous as possible."

"I'd imagine so. You're offering about a third of Forkroad's price, I believe?"

"I heard that Marco of Forkroad & Co. has a daughter, and she is a good friend of Your Highness. Consider the discount a payment for the friendship."

"A payment for the friendship, you say..." Mia narrowed her eyes at Shalloak as he put on an obsequious smile.

"The deal will end up severing a valuable relationship, after all. In order to make the deal satisfactory for you, I assumed a sizable sum of compensation would be necessary, which is what I currently offer."

She returned his smile. "So I see. This is indeed a very good deal for us, Mr. Shalloak Cornrogue. The thing is..." She paused to fix him with a glare. "There's something I've been dying to say to you, and I'd like to do that now."

"Oh? I'm all ears, Your Highness."

She looked at him and his clueless expression, then inhaled deeply. "If you think you can solve everything through money, then you'd better think again!" She smirked in satisfaction. "Like I said earlier, money is not important to me. I value friendship far more. Trust, loyalty, gratitude... These are all things that are much more important to me. Only a fool would throw them away for money."

"What—" Shalloak drew back, quivering. Whether from astonishment

or anger, she did not know. Nor did she care.

“It is pure folly to believe that every problem in this world can be solved through money. That kind of thinking is exactly what causes one to lose sight of the true value of things.”

Having hit him with the words she’d yearned to say in the previous timeline, she huffed out a breath of contented relief.

“Folly? The only folly here is... Hmph, I came here hoping to see what wisdom the Great Sage of the Empire had, and this is what I get?”

Mia paid him no mind. Payback was so satisfying that even Shalloak’s sour grapes tasted sweet.

“At the risk of giving offense, Your Highness, I must object. Friendship and trust... These are traps. To be caught up by such sentimental wish-wash and misjudge how one stands to gain and lose is a sign of weakness. By denying the rationality of money, you are succumbing to the pitfall of emotions. What a sorry sight.”

“Watch your tongue. You are speaking to the princess of Tearmoon,” snapped Ludwig.

Mia waved him back.

Then...

“Mr. Shalloak Cornrogue, no matter what you say, my decision will not change. I will do everything in my power to assist Forkroad & Co. Sir Marco trusted me and firmly kept to the terms of our contract. I must therefore repay his trust. To make an enemy of him is to make an enemy of me. I urge you to keep that in mind.”

She delivered her finishing blow and grinned with pure triumph.

Chapter 13: The Storied Life of Shalloak Cornrogue the Merchant King

Shalloak Cornrogue, the Merchant King.

When the great famine struck, he saw a once-in-a-lifetime business opportunity and capitalized on it, seizing the whole continent's food-distribution network in one fell swoop. After swallowing a number of companies and gaining control over countless independent merchants, he began referring to himself as the Merchant King.

The life that followed was one that brimmed with wealth and splendor. He was undoubtedly a man gifted with brilliant business acumen, and if there was a god of money and avarice, they were definitely smiling on him as well. His wealth continued to swell, pushing him to peaks of affluence unknown to any before his time. He was both hero and villain, rogue and champion—a warrior of fortune who seized glory from the maws of chaos and thrived in turbulent times.

What follows...is the coda of this tale—how the curtains fell on the storied life of Shalloak Cornrogue.

On his way to a business deal, Shalloak Cornrogue collapsed. Years of overeating and insufficient exercise had taxed his body beyond its limit. Though he technically survived the incapacitation, his body didn't. His limbs were no longer his. Left unable to move or speak, he could but lie in bed and watch the world go by. Absent a wife, children, and even siblings, his fortune was, by law, left in the care of his chief attendant.

His "god" did not save him from his plight. Rather, it left him, coin by squandered coin, as his chief attendant mismanaged his assets. Sadly, Shalloak's business acumen was not inherited by his subordinates.

"You flaming idiot!"

Time and again, he yearned to scream at the man. The chief attendant often agreed without a second thought to deals that, to Shalloak's eyes,

were obvious mistakes. The sheer stupidity on display enraged him to no end. If only he could vocalize his anger.

Even his frustration, however, did not last long. Soon, the life he'd been spared began to flicker as well. Then, lying in a magnificent bed in a room fit for a king with furnishing worth more than a lifetime's worth of wages for the average person, the richest king to ever walk the earth drew his last breath. He died without anyone watching—no, *refusing* to have anyone watch him go.

Like that, the story of his life reached its empty and utterly lonesome end.

...And then he woke up.

"Hmph, what a ridiculous dream," Shalloak muttered as the rattling of the carriage faded back into focus.

In his dream, he'd seen how a life in which he reached the top—the absolute pinnacle of aspiration for a merchant—would end. It showed him the last days of a man who'd worshipped money as his god. For a dream, it felt uncannily real, leaving behind an unpleasant aftertaste of bitter regret.

"It's all because of what that girl said. Such nonsense..." He snorted, finding comfort in the sound. Nevertheless, the words of Mia Luna Tearmoon continued to echo in his mind. "'More important than money'..."

Friendship. Loyalty. Trust. Gratitude. These were the things the princess had claimed to hold more value than money. "Mere platitudes. The thoughtless rambling of a child." He'd discarded those sentiments long ago. No... He'd sold them. They were dirt cheap, but dirt cheap was still money.

Friendship? One gold made for a good deal. Gratitude? He could receive a lifetime's worth and still be not a penny richer. Those who say that money isn't everything, that there are things more important than money...were, in his eyes, merely spouting the cliched mantra of sore losers. But...

"That damn girl..." He clenched his teeth. The Great Sage of the Empire was undeniably abundant in both wealth and power, and yet, she shared those beliefs. Despite being a living embodiment of incalculable affluence, she also insisted that some things are far more important than money. Hearing her say those words felt like a repudiation of everything he'd ever lived for. It shook him more than he thought possible.

"I heard something stupid, and it made me have a stupid dream. That's

all. Great Sage? Hah, give me a break. Who'd have thought she'd have such pitiful judgment that she can't even see the value in such a generous offer...? Tearmoon's nearing the end of its days if it's holding a girl like that up as a sage." He spat out the words like bile. Then, he tried for a mocking smile...but failed. Something in him sounded an alarm. It was desperately trying to tell him that the dream was real. That some time in the distant future, he'd meet a cold, embittered end akin to the one he just saw. In spite of that...

"So what? I've lived too long to change my ways now." He was a man past middle age. Was he supposed to now change his entire life philosophy? It wasn't possible.

Shalloak had given up countless things in the pursuit of money throughout his life, but the one thing he couldn't let go of was the "way of life" he'd abided by so fastidiously. The Merchant King, for all his brilliance, couldn't cut his losses on this one matter. That was why...

"There's no way I'll ever accept a way of life that doesn't recognize the value of money."

Forkroad was a particular source of his chagrin. Despite being a fellow merchant, the man ran his business with profits as a secondary concern. It was an attack on everything Shalloak believed in. But even *more* vexing was Mia Luna Tearmoon.

"Money is power. Money is my god. Who does that girl think she is, claiming there are things even more important...?"

She rejected his values outright, and for that, he rejected hers too.

"Unacceptable. Completely unacceptable."

The mercantile gift he was blessed with told him that the famine was no transitory phenomenon; it was here to stay. Consequently, the trade channels through which Forkroad imported foreign wheat would be worth their weight in gold. If they could regulate the supply of wheat entering the market—slow it down just enough to spike demand—there would be a chance for explosive amounts of profit.

Sure, a certain portion of the populace would go hungry as a result, but so be it. News of a few deaths by starvation might even fan the flames of crisis. The fear of death would rob people of their judgment, clearing the way for a bag of wheat to sell for the price of a castle.

As such, a policy of supplying the continent with enough wheat to

satisfy demand and keeping prices from soaring past appropriate levels was fundamentally incompatible with his goals. It would result in him loading more food per trip, increasing transportation costs, while simultaneously being forced to sell them for less. And for some strange reason, Forkroad was eager to comply with this absurd vision the princess was trying to put into place. He mentally mocked the two for their folly.

Because he had to. Anything else was simply unbearable.

“Tearmoon’s food self-sufficiency rate is low. That suggests a high degree of reliance on Perujin Agricultural Country. The king there, as I remember, is...”

Unbeknownst to Mia, the next conspiracy was already in motion.

Chapter 14: The Loyal Subject Anne...Hardens Her Heart (for Tough Love)

It was a pleasant day in late spring with the kind of warm sunshine that heralded the coming of summer and the impending wheat harvest season. Anne stood in Mia's room, watching her engage in her usual bed-rolling, and couldn't help but feel a hint of worry. It was something that had been bothering her since the previous summer, when they'd gone on Esmeralda's cruise. In particular, it was the events leading up to the cruise that had upset her. Mia, who'd developed a bit of a tummy bulge, had ended up enduring a period of considerable sweat and toil.

Miss Esmeralda might invite her again some time. Maybe it'd be best if she started getting a bit of exercise regularly.

Personally, Anne didn't think Mia was overweight. She was perfectly beautiful as is. If anything, a bit of plumpness only made her more endearing.

...Which was a dangerous thought to have from a slippery-slope perspective.

Her personal preferences aside, it was undeniable that Mia had lately been rather lacking in the exercise department.

The head chef said it's bad for her health too... I think it's time I stepped in.

So, Anne mustered her resolve.

"Milady? Um..."

"Mm? What is it, Anne?"

Mia wriggled her way across the bed to look up at Anne. It was the kind of movement one would expect from a sea creature stranded on land. A mermaid, perhaps. Something incapable of bipedal—or any -pedal, honestly—movement. The slothful sight might have been the last straw for Anne.

All the important negotiations, student council duties, and secret cult-battling Mia had to deal with on a regular basis were doubtlessly exhausting. The weight of such burdens was not lost on Anne. It was therefore her longstanding stance to allow Mia to indulge in indolence as much as possible while in the privacy of her own room. But there had to be limits.

So, Anne hardened her heart.

From the consistency of warm cheese to cold cheese. This was, after all, an attempt to play the villain for the sake of her friend. There was no serious face-heel turn going on.

"Milady, you haven't been attending dance lessons recently, have you? Why don't you ask Prince Abel or Prince Sion to join you for some?"

In general, Mia didn't *hate* physical activity. She was just...not inclined to engage in it of her own volition. Leave her alone for a few days, and she'd soon switch to energy-conservation mode and start slacking off. As her right hand, Anne had to warn her. As her confidant, though, she preferred to do it as subtly as possible.

"Dance, huh..." said Mia. "Interesting. It's been a while since I've danced. Asking Abel to join me for a session might be a good idea. Actually, in that case, I might as well get the student council involved and organize something like a standing buffet party. Except it'll be a dance-and-cake party—"

"H-Hold on, milady."

Hearing that Mia's train of thought was starting to derail, Anne cut her off. Dancing was fine, but it'd be counterproductive if she ate a bunch of cake in the process—and it would definitely be a *bunch*. Anne was no stranger to her mistress's love for food...or her appetite.

"That sounds like something that would require a lot of time to organize. What about...a nice long horse ride instead?"

Mia's metaphorical right arm deftly pivoted the topic. If only her physical one was as dextrous. "Hmm, that's an interesting suggestion too. I haven't been going to the horsemanship club lately either. I wonder how Kuolan and the others are doing... Yes, I think I'd enjoy reacquainting myself with long horse rides."

Fortunately, the pivot proved successful, and Mia's attention quickly shifted toward the new proposal. A willingness to give herself up to external

forces was one of her strong points.

"Oh, can I go too?" Bel, who'd been listening to the conversation, raised her hand. "I want to see if the baby horse is healthy."

"Ah, good point. You were there that time too. Well, I don't mind if you tag along, but hm..." After a period of thought, Mia snapped her fingers in inspiration. "I know! In that case, we should ask Rina to come with us."

"Rina too?"

"Yes. It'd be a shame if we didn't and she ends up feeling left out, right?" said Mia before flashing a sly grin. "That way, you can both join the horsemanship club together."

"Huh? You want me to join the horsemanship club?"

"That I do. You did pretty well when we were riding across the plains that time. With some practice, I think you'll be galloping around in no time."

Anne, catching on, added her support to Mia's suggestion. "I agree. Even I managed to learn with enough practice. I have no doubt you'll figure it out very quickly, Miss Bel."

For the record, Anne was a bit of a two-left-feet person in general, and it'd taken her considerable effort to reach the point where she could actually ride. This was, however, a fact she chose not to mention, accepting that a sacrifice of truth was an unavoidable cost of maintaining Mia's health.

"You can't call yourself a good princess until you can ride a horse, Bel. And you want to become a good princess like me, right?"

There was *so much* wrong with that statement in *so many* ways. Sadly, no one there would be pointing it out.

"But I..."

Seeing that Bel's expression clouded, Mia pursed her lips with another "Hmm." Then, she glanced at Anne before whispering in Bel's ear. "I know that you think you might get sent back to your original world at any time, and if that happens, then this would all be a waste. That's understandable. But listen, Bel. Even if you get sent back, it'd be good for you to get some horse-riding practice beforehand. It makes it a lot easier to run away..." She flashed a winking grin. "Besides, horses are adorable creatures. It'll be a lot of fun riding one with Rina. I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

Oho ho, good one, Anne. You found the perfect solution. I knew I could

count on you.

Mia smiled with satisfaction as she headed to the stable with Citrina in tow.

The answer is hobbies. If Bel finds a hobby, she'll probably stop being preoccupied with how her time here might be short-lived. She won't be nearly as interested in preparing for death once there's something fun to look forward to. Hopefully, anyway. I mean, I'd be doing everything I could to avoid dying if I were her.

Now that she'd more or less figured out the cause of Bel's wasteful spending habits, she understood that the solution wouldn't be simple. Nevertheless, she had to keep trying. Lacking options, the idea of introducing Bel to a hobby was therefore a welcome suggestion that she hadn't considered before.

Eventually, I'll probably want her to take up some classier hobbies. Like mushroom hunting. I'm dabbling in it myself, after all. For now though, horse riding will suffice. Horses are adorable, so she should have a great time with them.

As she pondered, her gaze drifted to the sweetly smiling figure beside Bel. "By the way, Rina, would you happen to know how to ride?"

Citrina tilted her head quizzically. The gesture was endearing, and the cuteness of her expression put finely crafted dolls to shame. Just looking at her like this, it was easy to forget that she was formerly involved with the Chaos Serpents. Taking part in conspiracies was probably a lot easier when one could ride a horse. Perhaps, Mia figured, Citrina already knew how.

"No. This will be the first time for Rina. I'm looking forward to it." Citrina giggled. "Oh, it's going to be so much fun riding with Bel."

"Hm..." Mia pensively crossed her arms. *If neither of them have experience, it might be tough for me to teach them by myself. I may be a master equestrian, but still...*

She *was* the founder of the Flotsam method of horse riding, so in a way, that was true. Nevertheless, master equestrian Mia knew her limits.

Soon, they arrived at the stable, where she ran into a familiar figure.

"My, you're..."

"Hey, miss. Long time no see." Lin Malong, who was tending to the horses in the stable, came out to her with a hearty laugh.

"Long time indeed, Malong. You graduated from Saint-Noel in the

spring, didn't you?" She thought he'd already returned to the Equestrian Kingdom. "Don't tell me you came back because you miss the horses," she added with a smirk.

He smirked back. "Nah, I knew the horses would be fine. It's you and Abel that I'm not so sure about, so I came back to check on you."

"My, really? Well, I appreciate your concern. We are, in fact, doing perfectly fine, so you're free to leave now."

"Ha ha ha, that's good to hear. But jokes aside, I was asked by Rafina to come back every once in a while to look after the horses. Gives me a chance to see how the horsemanship club's doing too."

"I see, so that's why. It's nice to see that you're still a ball of horse-loving energy," she said with a friendly laugh.

After enjoying some more banter with Malong, Mia peeked inside the stable. "Hello, Kayou. How have you been? I'm sorry I haven't been around more often to see you."

The last time she'd seen the horse was in the winter. Since then, she hadn't been able to find enough free time to go horse riding. For a moment, she worried if Kayou had forgotten about her, but the welcoming nose-huff Kayou let out upon seeing her laid that concern to rest.

"Mmm hm hm, yes, it's been too long since I've seen you. And you too! Um..."

She regarded the foal next to Kayou. Its delicate little ears twitched at her voice. There were hints of Kayou's gentleness and dignity in its visage.

"The little one's name is Gingetsu. Means 'silver moon,'" said Malong, walking up from behind.

"Silver moon! Mmm, I like the ring of that. What a wonderful name, isn't it, Gingetsu?" The more she studied the foal, the more she felt like she found her soul steed. She swore she'd ride it once it got a little bigger.

"Wow, it grew so much!" exclaimed Bel, hopping up to her side.

"It sure did," agreed Citrina. "The last time we saw it, it was still so little..."

The two girls chirped happily with each other as they gestured at Gingetsu, who seemed to remember the pair. It slowly approached them and twitched its nostrils. It was a very wholesome scene, and Mia watched them tenderly...until a thought made her frown.

"Huh. Where's Kuolan? Did someone take him out for a ride?"

There was something distinctively missing about her usual equine experience—feeling Kuolan's smug gaze on the back of her neck. For the longest time, she'd felt terribly uncomfortable around the horse, but ever since their daring escape from certain death that night, she'd grown fond of it. Its unflappable cockiness, once utterly grating, was now a reassuring quality. She trusted it like she would an old comrade in arms.

"Oh, Abel's riding him right now, and— Speak of the devil. Looks like he's back."

Mia turned just in time to see Abel walking in with Kuolan's reins in his hand.

"Hey, Mia. Did you come to do some riding?" He flashed her his usual easy smile.

"Yes, actually. It's a nice, sunny afternoon, so I figured I'd come. On that note..." She looked him up and down. "You're a real mess, aren't you?"

There were flecks of mud on his face. On closer inspection, his riding clothes were dotted with stains as well. He smiled awkwardly. "Let's call it a baptism by mud. This horse is really something."

"My, is that so? If you just wanted to go riding for a while, couldn't you have chosen a different horse?" Kuolan's disposition was on the wilder side. It was by no means an easy horse to handle. There were better choices for a leisure stroll. Kayou, for example. She was baffled by his choice. "Anyway, don't be too discouraged. Kuolan's a difficult horse to get used to," she added.

"But you rode him so effortlessly. If I can't, then...it'd make me look bad," he argued, lips pushing outward ever so slightly in a pout. "I'll learn to ride him. Just you watch. I haven't figured him out quite yet, but I'll keep practicing until I do."

Mia regarded him and realized at once what she was witnessing. *My! So this is what they mean when they talk about boys having stubborn streaks! How adorable.*

She had to hold her hand to her mouth to hide her grin. Though Abel was quickly growing into an impressive young man, his heart definitely outpaced his faculty. His metaphorical tiptoeing to seem more mature was downright swoon-inducing.

The way he sometimes gets so hung up on a thing and refuses to admit defeat is definitely one of his cuter aspects... Hm? Suddenly, she was struck

by a sense that something was wrong. *How odd. Why do I feel like I'm forgetting something...*

It was something important. Something she couldn't afford to forget. Or at least, she thought it was. There was something...*missing* from this picture. Something that had yet to happen.

Fwoosh!

Right at that moment, she felt a puff of air on the back of her neck. Rather than wind, it felt more like...

"M-My... What a strangely nostalgic sensation. I wonder what it is..." She turned to find herself face to face with Kuolan. More specifically, face to flaring nostrils. "A-Ah. Kuolan. It's been a while since I've— Gyaaah!"

Her undignified scream was drowned out by the thunderous roar of Kuolan's nose cannon. For whatever reason—possibly due to how long it'd been since the last eruption—the sneeze was even more powerful than usual.

"All right, I'll see you there in a bit..."

After a promise to reconvene, Mia began heading back to the dormitory to rid herself of horse slime. She strolled calmly out the stable, after which she sped up to a fast walk. A hundred paces later, she broke into a full-speed dash. Running like the wind, she made for the communal baths. While Anne was off getting her a change of clothes, she quickly slipped out of her current ones and jumped into the pool. Just as she worked up a good lather using the provided soap, Anne arrived with Mia's beloved horse shampoo and promptly started washing her hair. Anne worked quickly but carefully, finishing as Mia concluded her own cleaning routine. Then, Mia swiftly redressed herself and returned to the riding ground.

Once again, she ran like the wind until she was only a few steps away, whereupon she hammered the brakes and came to a full stop. A moment later, she resumed forward at a leisurely stroll, allowing her breath to catch up to her.

"Hello, Abel."

"Hey, that was fast."

Upon seeing her return, Abel hopped off the fence he was sitting on. His lean, athletic frame was clothed in a brand-new shirt and black pants of somewhat casual design.

Hmm... It's not exactly a princely getup, but this is pretty good too!

The gap between his usual appearance and this more laid-back attire was delightfully refreshing. He'd also washed his hair, allowing its clean black strands to flow freely in the breeze. The fresh fragrance of soap wafted from it and tickled her nose, eliciting a euphoric sigh from her.

As always, Abel's so handsome...

"Hmm? What's with the look?" Her prolonged gaze caused him to raise an eyebrow.

"Oh, it's nothing. More importantly, let's go into the riding ground."

Inside, Bel and Citrina were already receiving lessons from Malong.

"Wow, the back of a horse is so high up. I didn't notice before, but it's really obvious now that I have the time to get a good look around."

"Ha ha ha, it sure is. Galloping across a stretch of plains at this height feels real good. If you ever come by the Equestrian Kingdom, how about I take you for a long ride?"

"Yes, please! That sounds amazing!"

Bel seemed to be enjoying herself.

"You brought those two with you today, huh?" said Abel.

"Yes. Of course, I wanted to enjoy some riding myself too, but I'm mainly hoping to have Bel learn how to ride."

"I see. Teaching Miss Bel horsemanship..."

Abel crossed his arms and watched as Malong began walking forward, pulling the horse along behind him. Bel teetered unsteadily on its back. The look of slightly-desperate concentration on Bel's face as she tried hard to stay balanced reminded Mia of her past self. She smiled with fond nostalgia.

"That's pretty good. She might be a natural," commented Abel.

"She might indeed. Back during the Holy Eve Festival, she managed a pretty good riding form too. Who knows? Maybe she'll surprise all of us with how quickly she takes to it."

The two of them watched Bel's efforts with equally tender expressions.

"Once she learns how to ride, a lot will open up to her. It'll be easier to deal with all sorts of things. Not that I ever want to drag her into something like that again, but..." No matter how careful she was, Mia suspected that she'd expose Bel to danger again sooner or later. It didn't seem avoidable. When that inevitably came to pass, horse riding should prove to be a very

valuable skill to have.

These surprisingly serious thoughts occupied Mia's mind until it occurred to her to consider her own position. Specifically, the position she currently occupied next to Abel and the atmosphere that surrounded them. Standing beside her beloved prince while watching her wobbly horse-riding granddaughter with a mix of fondness and concern, at times shouting a few words of encouragement...

It was...nice. There was no thrill or excitement, just a quiet happiness. An ordinary one, as common as a roadside pebble, but a happiness nonetheless. And she realized then that she'd never imagined a future like this—a future of such mundane happiness.

Thinking back... All this time, I've just been desperately trying to escape disastrous futures. It was all I could think about. But what if I married Abel? Would I...

What *would* happen in that case? It was a new thought to her. Something she'd never explored in earnest. What if she married this gentle, warmhearted boy standing beside her? Her imagination began to run wild. She envisioned a pleasant day like this, where they took their children on a long ride, after which they'd all share a picnic luncheon of horse-shaped mushroom sandwiches, then...

"Hm? What is it?"

She flashed back into reality to find Abel gazing curiously at her. He smiled gently. She choked back an enamored gasp.

"What? It's, uh...nothing. Oho ho. Anyway, why don't we go for a ride too?"

She quickly looked around. Coincidentally, Bel had finished her ride and was climbing off the horse. Having clearly enjoyed the experience, she ran toward them, all bubbly laughter and waving hands.

Mmm hm hm, look at her go. She's so excited. It's good to know she's enjoying herself.

Just when Mia was savoring a fond moment of Bel-watching, her young granddaughter proceeded to trip and suffer a spectacular fall.

"Bel! Oh, this is what happens when you get too carried away." Mia hurried over as Citrina helped Bel up. "Moons, are you okay, Bel?"

"Yes, I'm okay." Bel let out an embarrassed giggle. "Wow, I took a big tumble there."

“Hm. Well, if you can laugh about it, I guess you’re okay,” said Mia as she gave the girl a lookover.

As she shifted her gaze downward, she saw...*the sight*. The awful sight of Bel’s tender little knee covered in red, *red* blood!

“B-Bel... You’re...”

Those were the only words she got out before Bel’s body fell away from view. Except it was *her* body that toppled backward.

“O-Ooooh...”

“Mia!”

Abel’s panicked voice was the last thing she heard before the world went dark.

Mia was someone who could faint from the shock of seeing blood. Blood meant pain, and she could stand neither pain itself nor the sight of it.

Chapter 15: Princess Mia...Recognizes Her F.A.T.

“Mmm...” Mia woke up to find herself in a clean bed. “Where...? Ah, I’m in the treatment room.”

Saint-Noel Academy, which gathered young nobles from all nearby nations, had an exceptional medical care system in place. This should come as no surprise, considering the one who enabled the proliferation of continent-wide medical care through the establishment of treatment centers was none other than the Central Orthodox Church. As its place of origin, the Holy Principality of Belluga was home to a wealth of medical knowledge accumulated over the ages.

Perhaps as a result of receiving such state of the art care, Mia felt completely refreshed and hopped out of bed. “Hmm... I have to hand it to Saint-Noel Academy. Their medical treatments are superb.”

...Or it could be the result of her not having needed any treatment in the first place. She’d fainted from the sight of blood, but Abel had caught her during her fall. Without any injuries to speak of, they’d simply laid her in a bed.

A girl who noticed her waking walked over. “Ah, you’re awake. How are you feeling, President Mia?”

“Hm?” Mia’s eyes widened. “My, you’re...Tatiana? What are you doing in a place like this?”

Her surprise was met with an awkward smile from Tatiana. “Um, I’m doing an experiential program here in the treatment center, actually. My father is a doctor, so I have some interest in the facilities here...”

“My, your father is a doctor? I see... Oh, that reminds me! Where’s Bel?” She hastily looked around.

“Ah, Grand— Miss Mia. You’re awake.” As if on cue, Bel walked in the door, followed by Citrina and Anne. They’d been waiting in the next room over. “Hee hee, look, Miss Mia. I got Tatiana to do my bandages. She was

really good at it." She pointed proudly at her knee, which was covered in a neat layer of bandaging.

"Are you going to be okay?"

"Oh, it's just a scrape. You're such a worrywart," said Bel, giggling.

Mia wasn't entirely convinced. The fact that bandages were used at all suggested to her that the injury was serious enough to necessitate them.

"It bled some, but there's no problem with the bone, and the wound wasn't that deep either," Tatiana explained. Her tone was devoid of her usual meekness; in fact, it brimmed with confidence.

"Well, I can definitely see your father in you. Did you learn all this from him?" Mia asked curiously.

There was a pause before Tatiana answered.

"My father passed away when I was only five, so...he didn't teach me much. I learned everything I currently know all on my own."

"My, I'm sorry to hear that... It must have been a lot of work," said Mia, nodding sympathetically.

Tatiana's expression, however, did not show sadness. Instead, it hardened with resolve. "President Mia, there's something I want you to know about."

With that, she proceeded to tell the story of her relationship with Shalloak Cornrogue.

"I came to Saint-Noel because I wanted to practice medicine like my father, or at least do something medicine-related. But my family was poor... Much, much too poor. Coming here should have been an impossible dream." Tatiana pressed a hand to her chest as she spoke. "However, thanks to the scholarship program that Master Shalloak created, I got the chance to study here. He even wrote a letter of recommendation to the academy for me."

"My! Are you serious?"

That surprised Mia.

I'd never have expected such compassion from someone like him, she thought. *I mean, he* literally *worships money. Oh, but then again, he did mention something about giving money to charity to maintain his image... That's a pretty common thing among the wealthy.*

Just as she doubled down on her opinion of Shalloak, Tatiana shook her

head as if she'd read her mind.

"I know there's a lot of hatred for Master Shalloak. Everyone says bad things about him. They all think he's doing it to improve his image."

Mia *hmph*ed, impressed by the acuity of the remark.

"But," Tatiana continued, "he started his scholarship program when he was much younger. At the time, he was still a new merchant."

"My, I can't imagine he had much money to spare back then. That must have been a tough cost to manage."

"It was, but he did it anyway. He said he was thankful for the good business he got to do, so he wanted to give back using his own earnings. There were lots of people like me whose lives were changed by him. He *saved* us. Some of us who have already graduated dream of becoming a merchant one day because of how much they respect him."

Interesting... Now this *is a very useful piece of information. Oho ho...*

Mia continued to listen politely, but on the inside, she was cackling like a maniac. What she'd just heard...was for all intents and purposes, Shalloak's embarrassing past. It was like some tough-looking pirate being seen talking to his favorite little kitty cat in baby talk. This was prime blackmail material! Absolutely mortifying stuff! The Shalloak of the present would doubtlessly consider this the epitome of youthful indiscretion —a piece of his past that he would try very hard to avoid remembering, for it was completely at odds with his current values. Setting up a scholarship program for the children of poor families he had absolutely nothing to do with? And paying for it out of his own pocket when he wasn't even very well off? What could such an act possibly represent but compassion? Or kindness? Or sentimentality?

For someone who went on a whole rant about sentimental wish-washing and the pitfall of emotions, he sure did a whole lot of wish-washing and pitfalling himself back in his days, didn't he? How dare he lecture me about it!

Shalloak, the coldly calculating superhuman who ostensibly was born for money and would die for it...turned out to be neither coldly calculating nor super. He was just a regular man with regular soft spots and regular emotions. In his words, he had weaknesses. Weaknesses that Mia now held in the palm of her hand and could abuse at any time.

She nodded with satisfaction. *That Shalloak fellow didn't seem like*

someone who'd give up easily. I bet he'll be back again. And when he is, oho ho... I'm going to poke him right where it hurts the most! What a nice man *he is. Oho ho ho ho...*

Had she been alone, she'd have let out her best villainess laugh.

"Please, Princess Mia," said Tatiana in a formal plea. "Please don't do anything too cruel to Master Shalloak."

The sincerity of her appeal caused Mia to sense a whiff of danger. *The "grateful for his scholarship program" angle might be a problem. After all, he* did *put in his own money to help poor-yet-capable kids become smarter.*

Knowledge was a weapon, and there were currently people with very sharp weapons who felt a great deal of gratitude toward Shalloak. In a situation like this, vilifying him might end up making Mia some very dangerous enemies. This upsetting realization only now dawned on her.

Tatiana herself was a potential hazard. The girl apparently aspired to be a doctor. Mia's experience with Citrina had taught her that medicine and poison are two sides of the same coin; it only depends on how they're used. If she were to turn someone like that against her...

The paragraphs of her own death by poison resurfaced in her mind.

I'd assumed it was Rina's doing, but I just realized it's totally possible for someone else to have done that.

Finally, Mia realized that she'd gotten far too comfortable.

Ugh, stupid me. I let my guard down completely. I already know I need to be alert and on my toes at all times.

She recalled the events leading up to the past summer. Slacking off on exercise had led to a slight flabbiness of body that was unpleasant. Her swimsuit had struggled to accommodate her newfound F.A.T.

And the same thing was happening again.

Oooh, I've done it now. I got too comfortable and let F.A.T. creep up on me. It hit my brain! I've gone mentally flabby!

So, after a period of careful consideration, Mia decided to change courses.

"Hmm..." she said, at last responding to Tatiana. "It all depends on how he chooses to act."

First, she emphasized that the one responsible for deciding how she'd treat Shalloak was ultimately himself. This was technically not a lie. She didn't want any beef with the man, much less to deepen their hostility

toward one another. The prankster in her certainly felt that tormenting him with the dirt she'd just dug up might be fun, but it wasn't something she was adamant about. With the great famine bearing down on them, this was a critical time. If he chose to lie low and not cause trouble, she'd be more than happy to simply let him.

The thing is, she also had a feeling that he wasn't the type to give up so easily. If Shalloak continued to interfere with Forkroad & Co.'s business, she'd have to stake her support for Forkroad, thereby maintaining an antagonistic relationship with Shalloak.

Keeping a petty feud going indefinitely with him like this is probably a bad idea. If only there was some way to just...break him. Mia snapped her fingers for effect. *Just like that, and make him admit defeat, then this whole problem would be solved... Oh, I know!*

A glance at Tatiana's face gave her a flash of inspiration.

"Let me think... You know, there might be a way to avoid any pointless conflict, but only if you give me a hand."

"Huh?" Tatiana blinked. "You want *my* help?"

"That's right." Mia nodded, secretly slipping an evil grin into the motion.

Even if I expose him to his face, he might just deny it. But if I bring her *with me, it'll give me a lot more leverage. That way, I can really make him squirm. After all, he can't play dumb when one of the kids he saved with his scholarships is literally standing next to me! Oh, you nice, nice man. What are you going to do when I introduce Tatiana as my friend? Oho ho... I'm going to corner you, and then I'll slowly pressure you until you crack.*

Shalloak had created his scholarship program in a moment of weakness; he'd succumbed to sentimentality. The incriminating result of that lapse of judgment was currently standing in front of Mia. She'd be a fool not to take advantage of it.

This also had the convenient effect of shifting some of the responsibility onto Tatiana. If her conflict with Shalloak somehow ended up deepening, she could shield herself from Tatiana's displeasure by pointing out that she had a hand in this too. It was all part of her plan to evade blame.

Oho ho, with so many pieces falling in my favor, Shalloak will probably realize that it's best for him to back off while his wounds are still shallow. There'll be much more humiliation waiting for him otherwise.

In war, casualties are greatest between belligerents of similar strength. If there is an overwhelming difference in power at the outset, negotiations could very well lead to one side packing up and going home without any bloodshed. As the princess of a mighty empire, Mia intended to march into battle with vastly superior numbers right off the bat. General Mia the Great had awakened and was flexing her tactical muscles.

I'm already busy enough with the famine. A short, decisive victory is definitely the way to go here. Just march right on in and crush the enemy! Assuming he does try to pick a fight with me, of course. Either way, it doesn't hurt to be prepared.

And so, Mia secured Tatiana's cooperation as a trump card. However, even she didn't expect how quickly she'd have to play it.

A few days later, an urgent message arrived from Rania, the Perujin princess.

"Milady, you have a letter from Princess Rania of Perujin Agricultural Country."

"My, from Rania?" Mia gave a puzzled tilt.

Rania Tafrif Perujin was currently back in Perujin. As their princess, every year around this time, she had to return home to take the lead and supervise their harvest efforts while also acting as a priestess for their Thanksharvest Festival.

"Hm... I wonder if it's about her ritual dance..."

This year, Mia was supposed to go watch Rania perform the ritual dance to honor the Lord during the Thanksharvest Festival. It was, in fact, the first time she'd been invited to the event. Her friendship with Rania, her establishment of Saint Mia Academy, and her offer of employment to Second Princess Arshia had led to deepening of ties with Perujin—ties which would become exceedingly important over the next few years as famine battered the continent. If possible, Mia preferred an audience with the king as well. Getting to know the man in person would be nice.

Now, while those were all fine and upstanding reasons for visiting Perujin, they were public-facing reasons, representing barely a tenth of her true intentions. The remaining nine-tenths was, of course...

Oho ho, I can't wait to try all the Perujin cuisine!

...Food. Which should come as a surprise to absolutely nobody.

Perujin, the Holy Land of food. Not to mention the festival is supposed to be giving thanks for the harvest, so there should be tons of amazing dishes. I doubt I'll even have the words to describe how good everything tastes!

Merely imagining the dizzying array of gastronomic delights that would be on display made her drool. She had to gulp down a mouthful to avoid accidental leakage.

She eagerly flipped open the letter, only to be left speechless at its contents. Apparently, a merchant by the name of Shalloak Cornrogue had approached Perujin with a deal, and Rania felt like he was up to no good.

"Th-That jerk! He really doesn't learn, does he?!"

Mia gnashed her teeth as she quickly considered the severity of risk posed by this development. At a glance, it didn't seem particularly worrying. Unlike the previous timeline, she was on pretty good terms with Perujin. She was close enough with Princess Rania to be exchanging letters like these, and recruiting Princess Arshia as a lecturer had further strengthened their bond. Still...

"I think I'd better pay a visit to Perujin...right away."

It was only a few days ago when she'd appreciated the extent of her negligence-induced F.A.T.—Mental F.A.T., that is. Placing too much trust in the personal connections she'd built up and failing to act would doubtlessly lead to regret. Her newly shaped-up mind determined that this was too risky an issue to ignore. If it turned out that she'd overestimated its danger, then so be it. But if she was right in her assessment, this would potentially be an empire-toppling crisis.

"Plus, everything's a matter of perception. I can also think of this as 'the earlier I go, the more Perujin cuisine I get to eat.' You know what? This might actually be a good thing!"

The shaping up of one's mind was at times inversely correlated with the shaping up of one's body.

"Can I go too, Miss Mia?"

Bel, the little eavesdropping pixie, pattered over and fixed Mia with a surprisingly serious look.

"Oh? Why do you want to go?"

"I want to go see that merchant named Shalloak. I'm a little curious about the way he thinks."

“Is that so? Interesting.” Mia pursed her lips.

To be completely honest, he’s not the kind of person I want Bel to be around...but it’s rare for her to express interest in something like this. Also, his personality aside, it’s true that the man is a top-notch merchant... It might be beneficial for her to see firsthand how I outmaneuver a seasoned businessman like him.

With that thought in mind, she studied Bel’s face. Seeing that Bel’s expression was completely serious, she nodded. “I thought you might be using this as an excuse to run away from your exams before the summer, but I see that I’m wrong. You seem to have a proper reason of some sort.”

“Huh? O-Oh, uh, o-o-of course I do. Aha ha.” Bel cleared her throat. “Oh, Grandmother Mia, please. I’d *never* try to run away from an exam. I mean, sure, I really want to avoid doing remedial tests this summer so I can have more time with Rina, but that doesn’t mean I’ll run away from my problems. As a princess who shares the blood of the Great Sage of the Empire, that would be disgraceful. Besides, I consider the exams an important chance for me to demonstrate how much I’ve learned from the study sessions you’ve been doing with me...”

Bel spoke with the characteristic rapidness of someone stringing a whole lot of excuses together on the spot. The sight of her granddaughter’s firm commitment to the principle of “when push comes to shove, just run away” reminded Mia of her own tendencies. She bit her lip. It was definitely a moment of mixed feelings.

“Okay, okay, fine. But just so you know, you’re not getting away from your exams, all right?” she said with a tone of finality before remembering something else. “Oh, right... I need to bring Tatiana with me too!”

Her conscience quivered uncomfortably at the thought of asking Tatiana to sacrifice her studying time to come with her on the trip, but she couldn’t afford to leave her trump card behind.

“He’s apparently important to her, and I’m asking her to come along to minimize the amount of fighting I’ll have to do with him, so it should be fine...”

Thus, Mia departed Saint-Noel accompanied by Bel and Tatiana. Ludwig joined her en route and the group made their way to Perujin Agricultural Country.

Chapter 16: Friends of Bamboo

Perujin Agricultural Country, a nation that boasted of having “no piece of land unfarmed,” did not possess anything even remotely close to a standing military. While there were royal guards who protected the king and his family, their numbers were dwarfed not only by the imperial army, but even the private armies of many Tearmoon nobles. Furthermore, many of their royal guards—upwards of eighty percent—were actually farmers rather than professional soldiers. So trifling was their military presence that if a war ever broke out, the only fate in store for Perujin was utter defeat.

Despite its inability to defend itself, Perujin still stood. The reason it had not suffered any invasions and could maintain its existence as a sovereign state was the widely-recognized authority of the Central Orthodox Church, as well as Perujin’s consistent stance of complete submission toward the Tearmoon Empire. The foundational moral fabric weaved through the continent by the Church and shared by all nations served as a powerful deterrent against frivolous attempts at conquest through warfare. On top of that, Perujin had the backing of Tearmoon’s military, which served to dissuade any potential opportunists.

This geopolitical reality did not, however, rob Perujin of ambition.

“Food is the vehicle through which we will conquer the continent.”

That was the grand vision proposed by an ancient Perujin monarch. Generations of royal families complied, vigorously pouring much of Perujin’s resources into the advancement of agricultural technologies. They’d effectively turned their weakness into an advantage, recognizing that their lack of military prowess also meant a lack of need. Instead of sinking funds into an army, they focused on agriculture. Their people rallied under the inspirational banner of improving Perujin’s prosperity by developing a large variety of high-quality crops. Inherent in this vision was the message that they wouldn’t always remain a vassal state. That with enough hard work, they’d one day get their payback on all the other nations. So they worked, and worked...

But their hard work never bore fruit. Why? Because their neighbor and vital source of military backing was the farmer-hating Tearmoon Empire. It was through being a vassal state of Tearmoon that Perujin had kept themselves safe, but their protector refused to recognize the value of Perujin's strongest asset: agriculture. Instead, the empire offered only belittling glances, as if they didn't deign to soil their eyes with the dirty sight of Perujin people working the land.

Between Perujin and Tearmoon, there lay a vast and nigh-unbridgeable gulf of culture and understanding.

"Please accept my deepest gratitude for granting me this audience, Your Majesty. It is an absolute honor to meet you."

The King of Perujin watched as the man before him, Shalloak Cornrogue, kneeled.

"It is a majesty I bear only in name," he said with a grimace, "as the king of a vassal state. There is no need for such excessive formality. But pray tell. What does a famed merchant like yourself seek from a country like this?"

The king was well aware that among the aristocracy, pride and deference were worth their weight in gold, but merchants sought only the gold. The only time they conformed to the protocols of nobility was when it would benefit them in a business negotiation. To merchants, kneeling was purely a means to an end.

"Ah, Your Majesty is as wise as the rumors say. I see that mere gestures and flattery will not earn me your trust."

"'Wise'? You speak odd words. I am but a simple man who rules a small rural country," said the king as he waved a hand at Shalloak to take a seat.

"'Simple'? It seems that we both indulge in odd words then. In my eyes, Your Majesty not only possesses a weapon that can slay even the mightiest of rulers in the continent, but continues to hone its edge."

"Oh? A weapon, you say? Might you enlighten me, then, as to what weapon I possess when my country is devoid of soldiers? Do you accuse me of amassing an army in secret?"

"Your Majesty jests. Armies? Soldiers? Leave such things to the foolish empire. To maintain peace in your land, you need only appeal to Belluga. No... You have something *far* more fundamental. Something that can strike

at the very core of human existence." Shalloak's lips spread into a smile. "You possess *food*, Your Majesty."

The king's brow twitched warily at Shalloak's comment. "I see... It's true that my country has invested a great deal of effort in our agriculture, but calling it a weapon is a tad excessive, don't you think? I find it a rather unsettling choice of words."

He attempted an evasive chuckle, but Shalloak refused to let him escape.

"As a nation so focused on agriculture, surely, you feel it coming. The signs are there: crops are failing, harvests are suffering—a famine is imminent. And what's valuable during famines? Not gold, not gems. *Food*." Shalloak looked the king in the eye. "Doesn't it get under your skin, Your Majesty? How your country is referred to as a vassal state of Tearmoon? Perujin boasts such remarkable agricultural prowess, but so long as the empire stands, your country will forever be treated as a footnote."

This statement *did* get under the king's skin. In fact, it went straight to his heart and twisted the thorn already lodged there, for it touched on the cursed chains that had been binding Perujin for a long, long time.

"That will change with the people in power," the king said. "I hear the Tearmoon princess is well-versed in matters of cuisine. Her presence will surely bring about positive changes to our position."

"Your Majesty wishes to rely on the pity of a young princess? That sounds like...a very defeatist attitude."

This time, the king's whole upper body twitched. He knew that the experience and expertise Perujin had accumulated were the real deal, paid for by the sweat and blood of countless technicians and farmers. The cost was immeasurable. The value, even more so. And yet...their reward was to be a desperate reliance on the pity of a single princess? Framed that way, it was a very bitter pill to swallow.

Nevertheless, he could still swallow it if he was alone in his grievances. According to his daughters, Princess Mia was a virtuous person. She was also in the process of consolidating Tearmoon's political power in her hands. Whatever she chose to do with it, it would undoubtedly be beneficial to Perujin.

But etched into the king's mind were the hunched forms of his people, their backs to the searing sun, their sweat wetting the soil. He saw them whenever he closed his eyes. Some of them were no longer here; they were

ghosts of past laborers who'd placed the country's future on their shoulders.

Could he allow the seeds they'd toiled so arduously to sow bear fruit in such a fashion? To reward their sacrifice with a Perujin like this?

A voice echoed seductively in his ears. Crops were *weapons*. They had the potential of becoming deadly armaments that could kill the monster that was the empire. That which their ancestors had spent generations building up could be used to strike back at those who looked down on them. The king felt his heart waver at the thought.

"What exactly are you proposing? If we hold back on our crop exports, Tearmoon will be knocking on my doors within the week."

"It's very simple, Your Majesty. Simply raise your prices. But not by an unreasonable amount. Keep it appropriate...or perhaps just a little more than appropriate. Not enough for Tearmoon to consider sending troops down to pressure you. You just need to push the price up a tiny bit. Then, when they've gotten used to the new price, push it up again." Shalloak narrowed his gaze. "By the way, Your Majesty, would you happen to know the trick to cooking alive the eight-limbed fish known as an Archdaemon's familiar?"

The king arched an eyebrow at this sudden question.

"It's also very simple," explained Shalloak. "If you suddenly drop it in a pot of hot water, it will escape. Instead, you slowly heat the water. That way, by the time it realizes what's going on, it's too late—it will already be cooked."

He grinned.

"What's important is the rate at which you fan the flame. And that kind of delicate adjustment is what we merchants are best at. So how about it, Your Majesty? May I be entrusted with the task of negotiating with Tearmoon?"

"So that's what you're after. I understand now. Unfortunately, I cannot give you an immediate answer... Tell me, Mr. Cornrogue, will you be attending the Thanksharvest Festival?"

"I certainly will, and I plan to turn a good profit, at that."

"In that case, I will give you your answer after the festival is over."

So ended their talk. Neither party was aware of the princess who'd been hiding within earshot. Nor did they know that, like a pair of bamboo shoots sharing underground rhizomes, she and her Tearmoon counterpart were far

more connected than they outwardly appeared.

This doesn't sound good at all... What should I do?

Rania hid in a room next to the audience chamber, urging her quickening breaths to still. The room was familiar to her. She and her sister used to play here frequently when they were young. A crack ran along the wall separating the room from the audience chamber, and their young thirst for mischief had often led them to press their ears to it and eavesdrop. Such behavior would normally be unthinkable for someone of royal blood, but Perujin, being a smaller country, was laxer in its standards and allowed for a degree of organic spontaneity.

I mean, I doubt father will actually do what he said, but...

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't rid herself of a lingering sense of unease. What if it had been her past self listening to the man, before she'd met Mia? Would she have been able to turn his offer down? Her heart wavered.

It's going to be a big problem if father goes along with the idea. Princess Mia needs to know. But...should I be telling her?

What her father was considering amounted to a direct act of betrayal toward Tearmoon. If things went badly, he might end up angering Mia. Nothing good could come of that. After a period of contemplation, she resolved to act immediately. She needed to get word to Mia as soon as possible.

I have to tell Princess Mia. She'll know what to do!

The one thing that didn't waver was her trust in Mia.

Chapter 17: Princess Mia...Enjoys a Fruit-Picking Session

A day's journey past the border of Tearmoon lay a small village, where Mia's group waited to meet up with Rania. Fruit farming was prevalent throughout the village, with vast stretches of farmland dotted by a few houses in the center. The settlement was surrounded by fields. With harvest season in full swing, branches sagged with the weight of their fruits while swaying gently in the breeze.

Needless to say, Mia was...

"My, look at this one. Doesn't it look ripe to eat?"

...In the midst of enjoying a fruit-picking session.

Wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat and work clothes with long sleeves and pant legs she'd borrowed from the villagers, Mia looked every bit the professional fruit picker.

"It looks so delicious; they all do. Edible gems, truly. Mmm... They smell so good."

Sweets Sommelier Mia twisted a fruit off its branch, brought it to her nose, and filled her lungs with its pleasant aroma. Then, she held it up to the light and studied its color with an intense gaze.

"Hm, it has received plenty of the sun's blessing. Finely ripened... Maybe a tad overripe, but that often results in a sweeter fruit. This one should be a treat for the tongue."

Hanging tantalizingly before Mia and her group were fruits known as rubyfruits. They were red and oval-shaped with a large pit surrounded by a thin layer of flesh which, after peeling the skin, was normally consumed by biting off pieces with the front teeth. Its flavor was a delectable mix of sweetness and acidity.

"Ah, look here, Tatiana! There's lots over here too!" Some distance away, a beaming Bel waved at the younger girl.

"S-Slow down, Miss Bel. You'll stumble again if you keep running like

that."

Tatiana hurried after her. The two had started chatting in the carriage and became fast friends. Mia smiled as she watched them frolic about.

It's nice to see that Bel's managed to make another friend after Citrina. Mia's inner grandmother was delighted.

"All right, keep your eyes peeled, you two! Make sure you pick all the ripe ones. It'll be a waste if we miss any." Mia herself was also having a blast. "Aaah, what an extraordinary experience this is. Picking fresh fruits and eating them on the spot. Now this is what I call true luxury!"

She'd already spoken to Ludwig and received approval for her plan to chow down on their spoils during break time. When it came to things like these, Mia was meticulous.

"I can barely wait. No, I *can't* wait! Oooooh, break time needs to come faster!"

It had originally been Anne's idea to go fruit-picking. Since Mia needed to leave early for Perujin and deal with a thorny negotiation, Anne had been worried that the stress would lead her to binge sweets. Hoping to help her mistress get some exercise beforehand, she'd proposed a fruit-picking trip. Judging by the fact that Mia was ready to fill every inch of her gut with fresh fruits though, it's reasonable to assume that she wasn't aware of her loyal subject's true intentions.

As it turned out, the fruit-picking session had an unexpected side effect —influencing the locals' opinions of Mia. Villagers watched her saunter through the orchards with increasingly fond expressions. The cause of their fondness was, of course, the fact that she was helping with their harvest.

Now, Mia was a princess. Her proficiency when it came to farm work was frankly abysmal. It was arguable that she was actually slowing the villagers down with her participation. Objectively speaking, she was a *terrible* laborer. The very fact that she was helping, however, carried great symbolic meaning.

To the villagers here, a princess was someone who shared their sweat and toil. Someone who led them both in spirit and by example during the harvest. And that was exactly what Mia did. The princess of mighty Tearmoon was matching their own, doing the work of agriculture that their country was known for. And not just that...

“Why don’t we stop for a break,” suggested the village mayor before nervously asking, “Princess Mia, are you, uh...sure you wish to eat these?”

The mayor had good reason to be nervous. While rubyfruits were undoubtedly delicious, they were slightly difficult to eat. The skin was too thin to pare with a knife, so naturally, the eater had to peel it off with their hands. Being a very juicy fruit, this inevitably resulted in uncomfortably sticky hands. Furthermore, with only a slim layer of flesh covering the large pit, it was unfeasible to shave off the edible part with a knife and present it on a platter, forcing the eater to directly bite into the flesh with their teeth.

In other words, eating rubyfruits required one to exhibit somewhat vulgar table manners. This made them a frequent target of mockery by Tearmoon nobles unfamiliar with their intricacies, who associated both the fruits and their eaters with crassness and unsophistication.

The mayor’s concern about whether Mia would be willing to tolerate the awkward process of eating rubyfruits, though understandable, proved unfounded.

“Yes! Finally! I’ve been waiting for this moment!”

Grinning from ear to ear, Mia picked up a rubyfruit, eagerly peeled off the skin, and sunk her teeth into its flesh without the slightest hesitation. Sucking audibly on the juices that flowed out, she gnawed her way down to the seed. Her childlike indifference to the stickiness of the whole affair instantly soothed the atmosphere.

“My, what’s the matter, everyone?” she asked, noticing the curious looks around her. “Am I eating it wrong?”

“Oh, don’t mind us,” the mayor said with a gentle smile. “That’s exactly how we do it too. It’s the tastiest way to eat rubyfruit. It’s just that we’ve run into some Tearmoon nobles before who refused to eat them because it makes their hands dirty, or because they felt the method is unseemly, and so on.”

“Huh. Well, they’re missing out. Getting your hands dirty is the best part! It makes eating these so much more fun,” she replied as she sucked the juice off her fingertips.

Coincidentally, the gesture bore a striking resemblance to how Rania used to do the same.

“Quite, quite. I see now that Tearmoon’s princesses are not so different from our own.” The mayor spoke what all the villagers were thinking. The

sight etched itself into their minds as an eternal reminder of Mia's likeability. It swept away all the prejudices they'd held about her station, leaving only affection for one of their own princess's best friends.

Now, anyone who single-handedly erases negative preconceived notions from a group of people should definitely pat themselves on the back, but Mia did no such thing. Was it modesty? Of course not. It was complete ignorance. As far as she was concerned, all she did was enjoy a pleasant day of picking and eating rubyfruits.

Ludwig and Anne watched the events unfold from a distance.

"As usual, Her Highness leaves me utterly speechless. She has already won over the villagers. I was almost certain she agreed to this fruit-picking proposal for Miss Bel and Miss Tatiana's benefit, but I had no idea she was planning to pursue it in this fashion..." Ludwig sighed in awe but soon furrowed his brows in concern. "With that said, though I recognize the value in gaining their trust, I cannot help but worry about Her Highness's health. I hope she doesn't force herself to eat more than an appropriate amount..."

Anne shook her head reassuringly. "It'll be okay. I have a feeling that rubyfruits are not something you can eat too much of."

Her prophetic turn made Ludwig lift an eyebrow. He looked dubiously at her, then back at Mia. "Wait, is she..."

Mia was peeling her third rubyfruit, but her motions clearly lacked the verve of her first. At that rate, a fourth one seemed unlikely.

"It's the same with my little siblings. When they eat things that are a bit of a pain to prepare, they end up feeling full just from the work it takes," explained Anne.

She'd suggested picking rubyfruits for that very reason after hearing from villagers about how they were difficult to peel. Chalk one up for Mia's right hand, who just took a round over her stomach.

"I see. That was very clever of you, Miss Anne," said Ludwig, evidently impressed.

Anne flashed the quickest of smug smiles before walking over to Mia.

"Excuse me, milady," she said, wiping Mia's mouth.

"My, thank you. Why don't you sit down and try one too? These are really good."

Another period of merry chitchat ensued, after which...

“Princess Mia? What are you...”

“Oh, Rania. You’re here.”

...Rania Tafrif Perujin, princess of Agricultural Country Perujin, arrived on the scene.

“I see... Fruit-picking with the villagers...” said Rania.

“Yes. It was a wonderful experience.” Mia grinned before tactfully adding, “I do worry whether I was getting in everyone’s way, though...”

Right now, Mia was on a roll. All those *fruit* juices must have gotten her *brain* juices flowing.

After meeting up with Rania, they’d relocated to the mayor’s home for lunch.

“Wow, so this is the famous Perujin specialty, the tahkoe.”

It took some time, but Mia’s patience was rewarded by the arrival of a thin wrapping of yellowish bread filled with meat and vegetables. It was traditional Perujin cuisine.

“Let’s see... This must be some sort of thin flatbread. Or maybe a crepe? The dryness reminds me of the bread used for rituals that they make without any raising agents...”

Following an initial analysis, she bit off a piece. A rush of piquant spices hit her tongue, which soon melted away to reveal the mellow sweetness of well-baked dough.

“Mmm, I see. There’s a unique flavor and sweetness to it. Now then, let’s try the whole thing.”

Being extra careful so the filling wouldn’t fall out, Mia took a big cross-sectional bite. An explosion of flavor ensued: There was the tartness of ambermoon tomatoes. The sharp stringing of red mustard on her tongue. A mix of spices she couldn’t name. Then, the savory juices of roasted meat. Crunchy greens provided a hint of bitterness, adding further depth to the multi-layered taste.

“Wow, that was quite the novel culinary experience. Oho ho. I’ve been wanting to try these ever since hearing about them from Rania. They are indeed very good.”

For the record, though it may come as a surprise to some, Mia could handle her spice. Not only could she eat spicy food in the first place, she

could enjoy them to the full extent. This was to the head chef's credit, who'd been serving her all sorts of different food in the belief that a wide palate was a good palate. From bitter to sweet, sour to spicy, Mia's tongue had become a veteran of the gastronomic battlefield. Although she struggled against a number of foods at first, she was now capable of enjoying even stringent bitterness. The plainness of boiled foods likewise posed no challenge. One could say that her palate had matured.

One could *also* say that her palate resembled that of the average grandmother, but not everything that could be said, should be said.

Anyway, the point is, Mia was now perfectly capable of enjoying spicy foods. Along with sweet ones, salty ones, bitter ones, sour ones, and whatever else was out there. She had the ability to find any and all flavors delicious. Which was a pretty dangerous superpower, if you think about it from a body weight perspective. On the bright side, it did at least make her extremely tolerant toward the dietary habits of other cultures. She kept an open mind and an even opener gut when it came to trying new food.

"I must say though, this bread is very intriguing. If I look at only the filling, I feel like I might as well be eating a sandwich, but for some reason, wrapping this bread around it changes its flavor completely."

"The dough is made from the flour of a type of grain known as fullmoon corn. It's a relative of wheat."

"Ah, so it's not wheat flour. That explains it," mumbled Mia as she took another bite. "Mmm, but it's definitely *very* good. I see. It possesses different qualities from wheat flour, so naturally, there are other methods of preparation more suited to it. Rather than making it into the bread I'm familiar with, this kind of flatbread seems to make better use of its inherent flavor."

Every locality is best enjoyed through local methods best-suited to it, and food is no exception. Assuming that mushrooms taste great no matter how they're cooked betrays a lack of diligence and attention. The true pleasure of mushroom cuisine comes from carefully considering the unique characteristics of each species and devising synergistic methods of preparation.

"Clearly, if I wish to truly appreciate all the different crops available in Perujin, I'll need to study cooking methods and recipes too. And to do that, I'll have to eat more..."

What had started as a reasonable thought ended on a rather worrying note.

Once Mia had finished enjoying all the food available, Rania slowly lowered her head, her expression apologetic.

"I'm very sorry things ended up like this, Princess Mia. I apologize for this situation my father has created..."

"There's no need for apologies, Rania. I'd appreciate it if you could explain the situation to me, though. What happened, exactly? You wrote in your letter that Shalloak Cornrogue is going to stir up trouble..."

Mia sneaked a glance at Tatiana to find her looking down at the ground with a grim expression. Getting her to cooperate was probably going to require as accurate a grasp of the situation as possible, so Mia prompted Rania to continue.

"A little while ago, this merchant named Shalloak Cornrogue showed up," explained Rania. "It's the Thanksharvest season, so there are always more merchants coming and going around this time than usual. Sometimes, it leads to new business deals, so father takes the time to personally receive each of them. Shalloak was one of those merchants."

As a matter of fact, it hadn't been coincidence that allowed Rania to hear that disquieting conversation. After being encouraged by Mia to help spread word of her sister's research throughout the continent, Rania had been on the hunt for valuable networking targets. Saint-Noel, being a gathering place for a variety of foreign aristocrats, was an effective location to raise awareness about her sister's discovery. Nevertheless, Rania knew that would not be enough on its own. Plenty of nobles had no interest in what happened on the farms in their domains, and royalty were often so removed from matters of agricultural expertise that conversation was futile. Even if she managed to get her point across to some, the spread of information would be limited to their own nations at best. If she wanted to truly realize Mia's vision—to disseminate knowledge of cold-resistant wheat throughout the entire continent—she'd need to get the word out to an entirely different group of people.

So, she set her sights on merchants with cross-border businesses. There existed, of course, merchants who sought only profits and would try to keep the information to themselves; those were no good. She needed people who

understood why it was meaningful to spread the knowledge and were willing to help her do so.

That led her to keep a watchful eye on the merchants entering Perujin during the Thanksharvest season. And not just an eye—her ears too. Specifically, she kept an ear close to the eavesdropping crack in the wall to the audience chamber where her father spoke to his guests.

Never let it be said that Rania doesn't have a mischievous side to her.

As a result, she ended up hearing about a plot to do harm to Tearmoon.

"I'm so sorry, Princess Mia. It's all because of my father—"

"No." Mia shook her head and stopped Rania from continuing with her repeated apologies. "If anything, *I* should be the one to apologize. This is the empire's mess, and Perujin just happened to get dragged into it. I'm sorry to have caused so much worry. I also understand how your father can feel...more than a little conflicted about his relationship with the empire. As the King of Perujin, he can't possibly appreciate the attitude of our nobles toward his country."

Of course, it was Mia's own ancestors who brought about this whole situation to begin with, so she made sure to lay the blame on the attitude displayed by Tearmoon nobles. Blame-shifting was her expertise, after all. Then, she sighed.

"It seems I'll have to speak to the king in person about this."

Her voice rang with resolve.

Chapter 18: Castle-Shaped Cake⇔Cake-Shaped Castle

After meeting up with Rania, Mia headed to the Perujin capital. Along the way, she stopped by a number of villages. At each one, she made sure to help the locals with their harvest (read: go fruit-picking). Emboldened by her experience with rubyfruit, she had a bite or twenty of all the produce she helped gather, ensuring that her palate was well-pampered the whole time. Needless to say, Anne and Ludwig also took great pains at each stop to prevent her from eating too much.

They continued in this fashion until the capital was only a short distance away, when Mia peered out of the carriage to find that the scenery had changed. Deep shades of green had given way to a soft lunar gold. So radical was the landscape's shift in hue that it was as if someone had placed amber glass right before her very eyes.

"I suppose they're not done harvesting the wheat here?" asked a curious Mia.

Rania smiled. "That's right. It's custom for the wheat growing near the castle to be reaped over a period of six days. The eldest child of every family, if they're over ten years old, all gather here and participate in the harvest together. Once they're done, the Thanksharvest Festival begins."

Perujin's Thanksharvest Festival was meant to offer thanks to the Lord, but it also functioned as a census. Every year, the eldest child of every family would gather in the capital and report on any changes to their family's status, such as new births. Then, a few members of the gathered would be selected to act as royal guards for the king for two years. After that, they would return to their respective villages, where they would begin farming again while simultaneously helping to police their hometown.

"Ah, it's a countrywide festival then."

"Wow! Miss Mia, look! I can see it now!"

Lured by Bel's excited voice, Mia gazed forward.

“So that’s the Perujin capital, Auro Ardea...” She glanced at the surroundings again. “Auro Ardea, the ‘skyward village of gold.’ I see where it gets its name.”

It was said that once upon a time, a Tearmoon noble had come to Perujin and decried the sight of the capital, calling it “an abject failure to live up to its name” and “little more than a piddling town in a poor vassal state.” Where, the noble had spat while leaving, was the gold?

Mia was of the opinion that had the noble come during harvest season, the story would surely have changed, for the object of his complaint would have been in plain sight—just as it was now. The village was undoubtedly adorned in gold. Finely ripened wheat grew in orderly terraced fields. From afar, it looked like a vast flight of golden stairs, at the top of which sat a rectangular structure.

Hm, that’s a rather unusual shape. Where have I seen something like that before...?

“It’s the castle, isn’t it?” asked Rania, who noticed Mia’s staring.

“Yes. It’s such a strange shape. Frankly, it doesn’t really look like a castle.”

“It sure doesn’t,” said Rania with a laugh. “It’s because castles here in Perujin aren’t built for war. There are no ramparts or guard towers. The walls are thin and made of wood. Maybe that’s why the people are so fond of it. We even have a traditional cake that’s made in the shape of the castle.”

Ah, cakes! That’s it! That’s what the castle reminds me of! Especially the color. It looks exactly like a freshly-baked cake! No wonder people are so fond of it! And apparently there are actual cakes shaped like it? I wonder what they’re like. Could the cakes...be the same size as the real thing?

“Does it interest you?” asked Rania.

“It certainly does!” Mia eagerly nodded.

As I expected, Her Highness is interested in the castle and what the Perujin royalty living there are thinking...

Ludwig had expected Mia to display some degree of curiosity in the matter. The unique architecture of Perujin castles was no surprise to him. He’d known that they were built without any consideration for their utility in warfare, which was an extremely rare approach.

Lunatear’s pride and joy, the Whitemoon Palace, was built on a design

philosophy that prioritized beauty above all else, but even then, it wasn't *devoid* of the faculties of a military fortress. Castles were ultimately defensive structures, and some elements of their fundamental nature always remained in their architecture.

Not in Perujin, though. Their castles threw all those considerations straight out the window. The building at the top of the terraced fields was so vulnerable that it felt naked. There was none of the crudeness usually found in structures meant to project an aura of power and intimidation. Instead, it felt...plain. Innocent. Almost cheerful. As for the source of this impression...

"It's a weird castle, don't you think?" said Rania in a casual manner. "If war ever broke out, it'd probably be burned down in the blink of an eye. But war would burn all the fields too, so it doesn't matter in the end. What's the point of having a big, beautiful castle if there's nothing else left?"

What she expressed was essentially the national strategy of Perujin, with their vast stretches of farmland and little else. In the game of war, their winning condition was fundamentally different from the other participants. They couldn't afford for their own territory to be turned into a battlefield. Unlike most small nations, they couldn't even stall for time and wait for reinforcements to arrive from backing powers. The moment war touched their lands, they lost.

In fact, they had no intention of fighting wars in the first place. The overarching goal of their strategy with respect to war was "stay out and keep away." The unspoken corollary of this approach was that if war *did* break out despite their best efforts, they'd simply accept their own helplessness.

Preparing for war was futile; the more they did, the more they wasted. In that case, it was better not to prepare at all.

Of course, the intimidation factor of having Tearmoon's military at their back and the difficulty of starting a war due to the system of morality established by the Holy Principality of Belluga both worked to Perujin's benefit. These two elements were pillars of their national security. Much of Perujin's diplomatic maneuvering therefore centered around maximizing their effect.

Despite that, Ludwig couldn't bring himself to believe that Perujin had absolute trust in this defensive strategy. He didn't trust humans to be rational enough to do so. Giving up if war ever broke out was, to him, the

same as saying “there’s no point in stockpiling food because no amount of food would be enough during a great famine.”

He therefore shared Mia’s supposed curiosity. What *did* Princess Rania think about all this?

“Is it truly possible to just...*give up* like that? If war ever breaks out, everything will be lost. To acknowledge that, to simply accept that nothing can be done and therefore nothing should be done... Can anyone truly do that?”

It was awkward for him to wade unprompted into the princesses’ conversation, but his curiosity got the better of him. Faced with his question, Rania paused for a pensive moment before answering.

“I think, like you said, there’s definitely an element of ‘giving up’ to it, but in my opinion, the reason my ancestors built the castle like that was because *that* was their ideal...”

“Their...ideal?”

“Yes. That one day, an age would come when castles meant for war would no longer be needed... That once sufficient food reached every hungry mouth, peace would come about, and looming monstrosities meant to strike fear into people would become a thing of the past. I think...they envisioned a future when all the world’s castles would look like peaceful structures.” Rania let out an embarrassed giggle. “It’s just a pet theory of mine, though. I’m sorry for going on a tangent. That must have sounded very silly.”

Silly indeed. In Ludwig’s eyes, it was nothing more than a childish fantasy. He knew, however, that the master he served was not someone who mocked the words of naive dreamers. Turning toward her, he found that, as he’d expected...

“It’s not silly at all. I think it’s wonderful.”

...Mia wore a most gentle smile.

I thought she’d say that.

No matter how fantastical the dream, how removed from reality the ideal, Mia would never belittle the effort that went into them. At the same time, Ludwig also couldn’t help but think that with Mia involved, maybe reality would be convinced to accept those dreams and ideals.

As he gazed reverently at Mia, she just so happened to giggle and say, “A cake-shaped castle. What a wonderful thought.”

Surely, she means a castle-shaped cake, Ludwig thought. But he simply smiled. He might have waded into their conversation, but he wasn't so crass as to draw attention to a slip of the tongue.

...*Was* it a slip of the tongue, though?

Chapter 19: The Two Princesses Walk up the Golden Slope

"My... What's this?"

The path leading into the capital weaved through the terraced fields in a smooth upward slope. As the carriage turned onto it, Mia noticed something that made her arch a brow. It wasn't the path being flanked by rows of people—she was used to that, and it wasn't surprising for the Tearmoon princess to receive an extravagant prearranged welcome upon her arrival. The issue was that the slope they were about to climb was completely golden in color.

"Is it just me," said Mia as she looked about, "or is the path up to the capital the same color as the field around it?"

"That's because there's a layer of wheat on the path," Rania explained. "When foreign dignitaries come here, we carefully clean the entire path leading up the capital. Then, as we like to say, we paint it with gold. That's how we welcome our guests in Perujin."

"What?! *All* of that is wheat?!" Mia did a double take.

"Yes. Perujin considers our finest wheat to be our greatest treasure, so we use it to adorn the path you take into the capital."

Wh-What a terrible waste!

Half of Mia wanted to scream. The other half wanted to sigh. This, she realized, was exactly the kind of welcome that tickled noble fancies. To them, welcoming nobility was a contest to see who could squander more in the process. They ascribed value to wastefulness. The more wasted to welcome them, the more respect shown toward them. That's why past Mia wouldn't have batted an eye at such a reception; it would have seemed perfectly normal.

Past Mia, however, was no more. Present Mia knew the bitter taste of regret when discovering there was no more food. She'd felt the futility of wishing she "could get back all the food that was wasted back then" when

her stomach had been rumbling for days. To experience such emptiness even once was enough to last a lifetime. So...

"Stop the carriage."

She instructed the driver to halt just before reaching the golden slope.

"Princess Mia? What's wrong?" asked a bewildered Rania.

Mia flashed her a small grin. "I'm going for a quick walk."

With that, she stepped out of the carriage. Her sudden appearance left the flanking masses dumbfounded. She swept her gaze across their ranks and smiled cheerfully at them.

"Hello, everyone. I am Mia Luna Tearmoon, princess of the Tearmoon Empire," she said before curtsying. "Please allow me to express my gratitude for this wonderful welcome you've arranged for me. It is a breathtaking display of generosity, and the message of goodwill is something I'll gladly accept."

Then, in a brief moment of silence, she slowly looked toward the castle at the top of the golden slope.

"However, I have no desire to ruin such beautiful grains by trampling them."

She proceeded to quietly take off her shoes.

"Wheat is meant to be made into food. Only by eating it do we extract its true value. After I climb this slope, I ask that you please retrieve this wheat and do what is necessary to make it edible. If you truly wish to gratify me... Hm, I think I'd love to see this wheat made into one of those castle-shaped cakes I've heard so much about. That would delight me to no end."

With her speech concluded, and without fear or reservation, she began walking up the golden slope. She'd expected the mattress of wheat to be hard and prickly, but it proved far softer, cushioning her skin with surprising gentleness.

"P-Princess Mia!"

"Oh, Rania, why don't you come too? I'd love to have you as an escort. Everyone else, wait until the wheat has been cleared away, then bring the carriage up, all right?"

"O-Okay, I'm coming!" Half-panicked, Rania kicked off her shoes and joined Mia at her side. The two princesses then took their next step up the slope together.

What Princess Mia had done left the onlookers in shock. Word spread quickly, awing the masses in its wake. Never had there been a noble who walked up the golden slope of wheat using their own two feet. Some had mocked the display as the obsequious antics of a lowly nation. Others didn't even comment, deeming it too worthless a reception to deserve mention. Even nobles with a conscience simply accepted it as an unavoidable consequence of stately welcome. In all cases, they'd remained in their carriages as they rolled up the slope.

The farmers summoned to attend such events had always watched with mixed feelings as their wheat was trampled by luxurious coaches. No one enjoyed seeing the fruits of their hard labor ruined in such a manner. Nevertheless, for the sake of their country, they complied, reluctantly but diligently blanketing the path with a layer of their finest wheat.

This princess, however, had refused to condemn the fruits of farmers' hard work to a wheel-trodden fate. Not only that, she was so loath to spoil them that she'd even taken off her shoes. Only then did she partake in the gracious welcome of slope-climbing.

To refuse to use a path the Perujins had so lavishly decorated would amount to a rejection of their goodwill. So she walked it. But she did so in her bare feet, displaying both her sincerity and respect by asking her carriage and booted retinue to stay behind.

On top of that, she'd asked to try some castle-shaped cake. The unspoken nuance of this request was not lost on her listeners. She was asking the Perujin people to use the wheat on which they so prided themselves to fashion a cake in the shape of the capital's castle—the hallmark and home of their royal family. It was a gesture of deep respect for Perujin culture.

Cheers erupted through the crowd. One eager whoop led to another, and soon, there was a wave of enthusiastic welcome trailing her. There was no performance in the people's voices—these were honest expressions of warm regard for an important guest and beloved friend of their own princess.

Amidst a chorus of encouragement, Mia and Rania stepped into the skyward village of gold—Perujin's capital, Auro Ardea.

There was a certain energy in the air as the two princesses walked side by side up the golden slope. Their adjacent forms seemed to herald a new era in relations between Tearmoon and Perujin. It was a subtle, intangible thing that defied description, but one farmer who was present at the scene later captured the moment in a striking art piece that faithfully evoked the sentiment, titled: *Two Princesses Walk the Golden Path*. Its solemn majesty ensured it a lasting place in annals of fine art. Birthed alongside it was an orally-preserved anecdote of a pair of bare-footed princesses climbing the golden slope that would be told and retold for generations to come. Leavened by the natural embellishment of changing tellers and passing time, it would nevertheless remain a staple story in the public consciousness for ages to come.

Chapter 20: One Does Not Simply Evade the Great Sage of the Empire

“So that’s the Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon...”

The King of Perujin, Yuhal Tafrif Perujin, watched as Mia made her way up the golden slope, his people erupting in cheers. The sincerity of their emotions was evident to him. People who’d begrudgingly complied with his instruction to gather for the Tearmoon princess’s reception were now welcoming her with all their heart.

“A most shrewd way to sway the will of the people... Impressive indeed. I see that the Great Sage of the Empire is not bound by the worthless customs of nobility. A pragmatist, then, with an eye for utility.”

Her unreserved willingness to discard the sensibilities of polite society in order to manipulate hearts bore a striking resemblance to the method of merchants. Yuhal snorted in disgust.

“She looks down on us with her heart, but up at us with her eyes. What a wily girl...”

He knew that the nobility was not a monolith. Among the mindless glory-chasers, there existed those who were relentlessly rational and lived by the principle of “pride is worth nothing compared to material gain.” In his eyes, Princess Mia was clearly one of those rare breeds. He deemed her a realist who would choose profit over ego.

“But does she know about the properties of our wheat?”

Normal wheat was prickly and painful when handled with bare skin, which often remained itchy for some time afterward. Perujin wheat had lost most of its irritating thorns through selective breeding, but that should not be obvious to the untrained eye. If she’d trodden upon them knowing them to be safe, then the acuity of her wit and perception was something to be wary of, if not feared.

“Or, perhaps...she didn’t care either way?”

His brows twitched at a realization. Had she stepped on the wheat and

injured her feet, she could have used that as leverage for extortion. Perhaps that had been her intention all along. She surely hadn't expected Perujin to be imprudent in their preparation, but if they were, she'd be fine with that too.

"Either she had prior knowledge of our wheat, or she trusted the extent of our consideration for our guests...*or* she knew she could play either hand, thorns or not."

Whatever her reasoning, her actions had to be the result of calculation. He couldn't see it being anything else.

Perhaps because he didn't *want* to see it being anything else. The princess of the empire against which he'd sworn eventual retaliation *needed* to be a menacing figure. A looming, powerful enemy with ice in her heart. She needed to be a merciless opponent who'd trample his people at the slightest opportunity, or someone who faked her benevolence toward the masses until circumstances favored her inner cruelty. He needed her to be. Because otherwise, what would it make of him? And the risks he'd taken? The risks he was about to take?

He would fight for his payback. It was time to even the age-old score.

Yuhal saw what he wanted to see. Believed what he wanted to believe. His world was a fabricated one that stood on convenient falsehoods.

"Still, who would have thought that the first time a member of Tearmoon's imperial family comes to Auro Ardea, she would walk up the slope herself. Some things simply defy prediction..."

As he spoke those words, he felt an odd ripple in his mind. Less thought than sensation, it caused an old memory to resurface.

"No, it can't be... Her mother... The empress consort... Didn't she come here before? Wait, or is that a dream I'm remembering?"

Ethereal fragments bubbled gently to the surface in his pool of his mind, too faint to determine whether they were fact or fiction. Yuhal frowned at the odd vagueness of this memory. Eventually, he shook his head in dismissal.

"Mixing dreams with reality now, am I? Age takes its toll on memory, I see." He chuckled wryly in a dry, gravelly voice.

"We are most honored by your willingness to make the long journey here personally, Princess Mia." Yuhal stepped out to greet Mia just as she

reached the top of the golden slope. “I am Yuhal Tafrif Perujin, King of Perujin. It is my utmost pleasure to meet you.”

Then, he lowered himself to one knee. This was unthinkable behavior for a king, even if he was in the presence of the princess of Tearmoon. Yuhal, however, was also one who could sacrifice pride in service of necessity. A greeting from the king of a vassal state was best performed with excessive humility, especially when said king had to divert attention away from the sinister plans he harbored.

“My, Your Majesty, how exceedingly courteous of you. My name is Mia Luna Tearmoon, and it’s a pleasure to meet you as well.” She returned a curtsy.

“I am aware that you have been most kind to my daughters. I regret not expressing my gratitude in person earlier. Though it is little recompense, we have arranged a welcoming feast tonight in your honor. If you are not overly exhausted from the journey, your attendance would be most appreciated.”

“My, that sounds wonderful. I will certainly be attending this feast. No matter how tired I am, or how full my stomach, I will never turn away an opportunity to try more Perujin cuisine. The food here is simply sublime! I am looking forward to enjoying myself tonight.”

After trading the usual flattering formalities, Mia put a curious finger to her chin.

“On that note, I do have *one* request.”

“A request? What might it be?”

“This welcome feast for me... Could I ask that Shalloak Cornrogue be invited to attend as well?”

“Oh?”

The sudden appearance of the hitherto unmentioned name took Yuhal by surprise. He glanced at Rania, who pointedly resisted making eye contact, and held back a sigh. *So that’s how it leaked... I hadn’t expected my own daughter to betray me.*

Keeping his expression entirely unchanged, he said, “But he is nothing more than an ordinary merchant. I cannot see how he would be a fitting addition to your evening banquet. What is it about him that interests you?”

Though not stated explicitly, the nuance was clear: Inviting a mere merchant to a banquet meant to welcome the princess of Tearmoon was

entirely inappropriate. Mia, however, smiled and said, “As a matter of fact...”

Her reply was interrupted by the arrival of her carriage. Two girls of similar age to her stepped out, followed by a maid and a young bespectacled man. Mia turned toward them and repeated herself.

“As a matter of fact,” she continued, “my friend Tatiana feels a great deal of gratitude toward this Shalloak fellow and would love to meet him and thank him in person.”

As her gaze fell on Tatiana, the girl stiffened nervously at the sudden attention.

I see. She’s already prepared the pretext. Hm, to be expected, I suppose, for someone of her caliber...

Yuhal regarded Mia, a girl younger than his own daughters, and resolved to double his wariness in dealing with her.

“Oho ho,” Mia chuckled. “I’ve heard he’s a very kind man, and I’m looking forward to hearing stories about all he’s done for her.”

He nodded cautiously, noticing an eeriness to the way she smiled.

“Is that so? Well... I shall arrange for it then.”

Finding that he had no way of evading the request, he resisted the urge to grimace and complied.

Chapter 21: Mia's All-Out Negative Campaign: Operation Mudslinging!

"Oho ho, that went swimmingly, if I do say so myself. I've succeeded in dragging Shalloak to the banquet."

After the initial meeting with the King of Perujin concluded, Mia was shown to a room in the castle for recuperation. With her were Anne, Ludwig, Bel, Rania, and Tatiana. She smiled cheerfully at them.

"How should we move next?" asked Ludwig, adjusting his glasses. "We can certainly pressure him to continue doing business with the empire through veiled threats, but..."

"Hm, the fact you're suggesting that out loud with Rania in the room tells me you're not seriously considering the idea," said Mia.

"Am I not? I could be doing so on purpose. Having Princess Rania here could be part of the pressure, after all."

She sneaked a quick glance at Rania. Fortunately, Ludwig's comment didn't seem to bother the Perujin princess. Mia turned back toward him.

"In that case, allow me to make one thing clear: I can't change what happened in the past, but now that I'm here, I have no intention of compelling Perujin to obey us through pure force."

In the previous timeline, the empire had done so...and failed. Holding an opponent down with force meant that once the force was lost, the opponent could easily spring back up and retaliate. In this case, not only would the opponent retaliate when the chance came, they'd try to inconspicuously chip away at the empire's power in the meantime. It was also possible for them to borrow enough power from another nation to rival the empire's.

That simply would not do. Mia's chicken heart could hardly stand knowing such terrifying eventualities lay in the future. Therefore...

"Our approach to persuading Perujin Agricultural Country boils down to one word: trust. That is all."

Just as trust in Mia had pushed Rania to send her message, when the

empire was faced with a problem it could not solve on its own, help would not come from a nation that had been forced into submission. Only nations who shared a mutual bond of trust would lend aid. How was she to earn this trust, then?

Mia's plan was exceedingly simple. The way she saw it, trust was a relative matter, and all she had to do was reduce her enemy's share. Sadly, considering the historical actions of Tearmoon nobles in this country, forging a proper relationship based on trust was likely difficult. She may have been personally on good terms with Rania and Arshia, but expanding that kind of fellowship to a population scale would take considerable time.

I swear, my ancestors have been nothing but a pain in the rear. None of this would be a problem if they hadn't come up with this whole "let's hate on the farmers" nonsense. Ugh, them and their stupid discrimination!

Reshaping biases within the empire and winning Perujin's trust were both extremely time-consuming tasks. Therefore, Mia decided to turn the problem on its head—if she couldn't improve Perujin's trust in herself, she could just undermine their trust in Shalloak.

In other words, it was time for some negative campaigning. She was going to expose Shalloak in front of the Perujin king.

The man's thorough commitment to the principle of "money above all" was the source of his allure. His willingness to do anything and everything in pursuit of profit made him seem a man of monstrous potential. It bred a sense of expectation in people who'd look at him and think, "Hell, maybe this guy really *can* do it."

And that was the mask she was going to mercilessly rip off, exposing him for the tender softie he was. She planned to show everyone that he was just a normal person with all the sentimentality and naivete of his peers. In doing so, she'd shatter the Perujin king's wild little idea of realizing his payback dream by delegating it to Shalloak.

"Oho ho, I'm going to yank the wool off his eyes." She looked toward her trump card. "And that's where you come in, Tatiana."

Tatiana was the only one who knew the Shalloak of the past. Frankly, Mia would be lying if she said she didn't harbor a doubt or two about the girl. After all, Tatiana felt indebted toward Shalloak. She probably wouldn't appreciate seeing him humiliated by Mia.

It'd be a problem if she refused to testify because of that.

It was probably prudent to give her one more push. Just in case.

"Remember how I said it would depend on Shalloak," asked Mia, "and how he chooses to act?"

First, the blame-shifting. It had to be established that this was all his fault to begin with, because if he'd just stayed put, none of this would have happened. In no way was Mia responsible. She was just reacting out of necessity.

"We're doing this for his sake too."

Making a long-term enemy of the empire would not benefit Shalloak. He'd already given the empire an upsetting gash. Not prying the wound open further could only be good for him. By implying that Tatiana's cooperation would ultimately be a boon for Shalloak, Mia was trying to lessen Tatiana's psychological burden. It was, to be honest, a pretty cheap shot. Then, before her victim had time to recover and recognize her underhandedness, she followed up with the finishing blow.

"That's why there's no need for you to lie. Don't hold back. Just go and give his cheek your best metaphorical smack!"

With that, she put the final touch on Operation Mudslinging.

"...By the way, Princess Mia, are your feet okay? The skin, I mean."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

Rania's question to Mia resulted in both of them trading puzzled frowns.

"You stepped on the wheat, right? Do your feet hurt or itch anywhere?"

"Now that you mention it, I guess they do. A bit of both, I think."

"I thought so..."

Rania kneeled down in front of her, then gestured for her to sit down.

"Excuse me," she said as she quickly removed Mia's shoes. "You see, Princess Mia, wheat has very fine thorns that cause pain and itching when they get into your skin. The wheat we covered the path with are a special Perujin strain developed through selective breeding, so they usually don't cause any discomfort, but it'd be a very different story if we used a different strain. Please be very careful if you ever try something like that again."

"My! Is that so? No wonder they felt sort of prickly..." Mia remembered the existence of skin-searing mushrooms and shuddered. "Moons, I'm terribly sorry I made you walk over them too, Rania."

"I'm used to it, so it's okay. I'm sorry too for not warning you in

advance. You didn't give me much time, though."

"I had no idea. I'll be more careful from now on."

Hearing that she could have seriously injured herself, Mia reflected on her rashness and earnestly resolved to be more prudent. The rest of the room, meanwhile...

"But...you'd have done so anyway, wouldn't you? Even if you did know."

"...Huh?"

"If there was no other way to demonstrate your sincerity to the farmers, you'd do it even if you knew the risks, right?"

"I-I would? Uh..." Mia was about to say no, but a quick survey of the room told her she was an extreme minority on this issue. Everyone else clearly shared Rania's opinion. So, she pivoted. "Well, I suppose I would, yes. If it was necessary, I'd do it. Probably."

Swept up by the overarching sentiment in the room, she ended up agreeing, only to realize... *W-Wait a minute... If I run into the same situation again later, doesn't this mean I'll have to just suck it up and let it make my feet all itchy and painful?*

While she wrestled with this foreboding thought, Rania gave her feet a thorough inspection before saying, "I think we'd better treat it a bit."

"Is there some sort of remedy for this?" asked the doctor-aspiring Tatiana, whose curiosity was immediately piqued.

Rania nodded.

"There's a place here in the capital called Crolio Pond. The water there is said to have therapeutic properties. Soaking in it can reduce itching and heal minor wounds. People also use it as a natural bath of sorts, so this might be a good chance for everyone to wash off the dust and sweat from the journey."

Chapter 22: Princess Mia...Takes a Dagger from Tatiana (in Her Heart)

“So this is Crolio Pond... It’s quite the scenic place,” said Mia.

Rania led their group to a man-made pond. Unlike the castle with its predominantly wooden architecture, this was made with layers of stone. It was also well-maintained, and the flowing of its beautifully clear water made for a soothing ambience that invited visitors to doze off to the peaceful atmosphere.

“I told everyone else to refrain from entering, so we can wash off here.”

The pond was covered on all four sides, affording plenty of privacy.

“Hmm... It’s almost like a bath chamber. The lack of a roof bothers me a little, but it’ll certainly do for cleansing ourselves.”

Mia promptly kicked off her shoes and slipped out of her clothes, throwing them in a heap on the ground. With Anne’s help, she quickly changed into a one-piece bathing garment.

“Come on, Bel. You’re coming in for a dip too. Tatiana as well. We’re attending a banquet tonight, so make sure you’re both nice and clean,” she said, acting like the big sister to the pair of girls.

Her facade of maturity lasted all but a few seconds until she laid eyes on the pile of fabric at Bel’s feet. The pile of *neatly folded* fabric.

“Okay, Miss Mia!” Bel, who’d already removed all her clothes, answered in an eager tone.

To her side was Tatiana who, though still in the midst of changing, was also folding each discarded piece of clothing. In fact, perhaps due to a fastidiousness of character common in the medically-inclined, her pile was even neater than Bel’s.

Mia wordlessly glanced down at her own messy mound of clothes, at the summit of which lay a carelessly scrunched dress.

It should be reiterated that Mia was the princess of Tearmoon. As a proud bearer of imperial blood, she was accustomed to being serviced by

attendants. There had never been any need for her to pay attention to what happened to her clothes after she removed them. She trusted Anne to tidy them up after, and Anne had always done so. But...

Mia hastily and surreptitiously straightened out her own pile.

It wasn't about need. It was about being the big sister to the two younger girls. The welfare of her ego was on the line!

"All right, now that you're all ready, it's time to jump in!" she declared as if she'd been waiting on the girls to finish folding their clothes all this time. Then, with evidence of her sloppiness duly destroyed, she marched confidently toward the edge of the pond.

First, she touched a toe into the water. It wasn't as cold as she'd expected. She plunged her whole foot in. The mild chilliness felt refreshing on her sun-warmed skin. Next, she submerged her legs up to the knees. Already, the itchy stinging on her soles was beginning to fade. The speed at which the water took effect was almost magical.

"Wow, this really does work wonders. What's with this water?"

"I heard it's because this spring water contains substances that have therapeutic effects on wounds and fatigue," explained Tatiana as she walked up to the edge as well.

"My, therapeutic substances..."

Mia pulled one foot out of the water and looked at it. As far as she could tell...it didn't *look* special.

I mean, it stings a bit, but it doesn't really bother me that much. Especially considering how I've cut my feet on the dungeon floor before. Those rocks were pretty jagged.

For Mia, who'd gone through the character-building experiences of dungeons and guillotines, wheat-induced dermatitis was hardly worthy of concern.

"How do you feel, milady? Should I maybe...?" said Anne, leaning worriedly in.

At that, Tatiana raised her hand. "Oh, if you don't mind, I can maybe take a look."

"Ah, that's right. You know some medicine, right?" said Mia. "In that case, Anne, could you look after Bel for me? Give her a good scrub, okay? I want her to be not just presentable but spotless."

"I... Okay, I understand."

There was a brief moment in which Anne seemed to catch her breath. Then, she nodded.

Hm? That was odd. That was when Mia noticed a general lack of cheerfulness on Anne's part. *I hope it's just because she's tired... Either way, this deserves some attention. I'll ask her about it after I finish my bath.*

A prompt response seemed prudent. The confrontation with Shalloak was still waiting for her later in the evening. She'd rather not be blindsided by a problem in her own camp then. As she mulled her options, she lifted a foot for Tatiana to inspect.

The younger girl examined the bottom of her foot for a while, then gave her calf a few squeezes. Her brows furrowed, and her lips protruded. "Oh? Is it swollen all the way up there?"

"No, I think it's stiff from all the walking..." mumbled Tatiana as she began to rub it more vigorously.

"My, you can do massages too? It feels very nice."

As a test, Mia tried giving her other calf a few squeezes in the same fashion. It felt...a little more *fleshy* than she remembered, but she figured it was just a trickery of the mind. Until Tatiana's next statement, that is.

"Um, Your Highness, I know that is a very improper thing to say, but if I may be so bold..."

Mia looked up to find Tatiana gazing at her with a very serious expression. Her stomach fluttered at the thought of the prickly wheat having done more damage than expected.

"What is it?" she asked nervously.

"I must inform you that ever since the beginning of this journey, I've been keeping an eye on your diet and...I think you're eating too much."

"...Huh?"

Mia's jaw dropped. She sat there in stunned silence as Tatiana continued to massage her calves. Eventually, after what must have been sufficient flesh-kneading, she nodded with the aura of a doctor coming to a conclusive diagnosis.

Wh-What's with that nod? What did she figure out?!

"Eating too many sweets will do bad things to your body. Obesity is harmful to your health."

"D-Did you just say...*obesity*?"

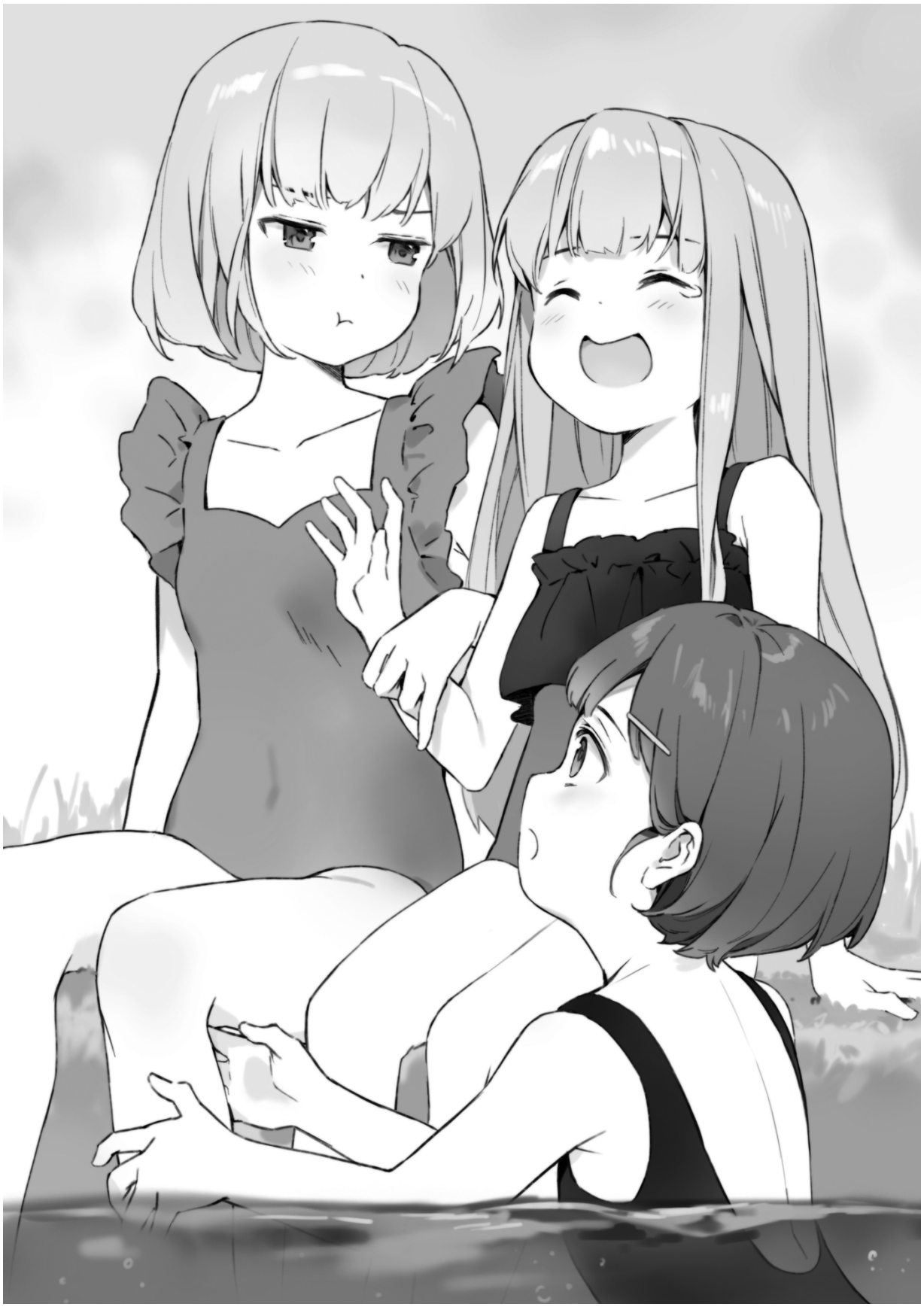
"Yes. We haven't reached that point yet, but if you eat too many sweet

things, you'll gain too much weight and damage your health."

She hadn't reached that point yet. Embedded in that statement was the implication that *eventually*...she might. She hadn't crossed the line, but she'd inched close enough to warrant a mention. Tatiana's merciless verdict left her reeling. As she ruminated anxiously on the girl's pronouncement, each word echoing like thunder, she wordlessly gave the underside of Bel's upper arm a squeeze.

"Eeek! M-Miss Mia, that tickles!"

Ignoring her granddaughter's giggling squeal, Mia then squeezed the same part of her own upper arm. In comparing their relative corpulence, she realized with a gasp that...hers was chubbier! With no more excuses left to hide behind, she had no choice but to accept the crushing reality that she'd failed in her judgment—she'd been overeating!



“I strongly advise Your Highness to pay more attention to what and how much you eat. Your health is very important, after all,” said Tatiana in an increasingly serious tone.

“O-Oho ho, of course. You’re right. I...appreciate your willingness to give admonishment when necessary. It takes courage to do so, and it’s certainly an important quality for doctors to have...” replied Mia, trying to keep her voice from trembling too much. “I-I commend your frankness, and...hope you will never lose this invaluable aspect of your character. Should you, uh...ever run into trouble from speaking your mind in this fashion, do come to me. I will help you. That, I promise.”

In general, Mia was someone who could take advice. However, being told “Your Highness, you’re getting a little porky, so you’d better start watching what you eat!” was a tad too much to swallow. After all, she was the only victim of this advice. Such uneven distribution of pain was unacceptable! If she had to take a dagger, other people should have to as well. So she gave Tatiana a friendly push, encouraging her to continue doling out her frank, heart-wrenching advice to whichever poor soul would end up her next victim. When it came to suffering, Mia was a big proponent of sharing—obligatory, whether-you-like-it-or-not sharing.

I bet Esmeralda and her friends are closet overeaters too. I know they are! They must all have flabby bits somewhere. Hmph, I’m going to give them all a taste of my humiliation!

Another thought then occurred to her.

Hmm... On that note, Perujin vegetables are very fresh, and their fruits are all nice, juicy things that look really healthy to eat too... There’s still time until the banquet. Maybe a brief snacking session won’t hurt too much. I’ve come all the way to the capital, and the place is known for its tasty snacks. I wouldn’t want to disrespect their culture...

Before long, she was already entertaining ideas that flew in the face of Tatiana’s admonishment.

With her pond bath concluded, Mia returned to her room. She left Bel—who’d wanted to go sightseeing—with Tatiana and asked Ludwig to take them out on a tour. Being Mia, she also reminded them to research the local delicacies and report back to her.

It’s important to figure out which are the ones I can take back home, and

which I need to try while I'm here.

She'd already shaken off the shock of being told she was overeating. For the record, Mia was someone who accepted honest and truthful advice. Like Tatiana had said, she'd eaten too much on this journey. That much, she admitted. It was bad for her health, and it endowed her upper arm with a squishiness she didn't much appreciate. All this, she humbly acknowledged. Which was why she resolved to fix things...*after* this trip ended.

Trips are special. You only go on trips every once in a while, and there are sweets that can only be eaten— I mean, there are experiences that can only be had here in Perujin. It'd be a waste not to enjoy them while I can!

That was her compromise. For the duration of this trip, she'd turn off her guilty conscience. For what was supposed to be a hardening of resolve, it sounded exceedingly similar to the usual "I'll do it tomorrow" excuse used by slackers everywhere, but regardless, her resolve had hardened.

But before going any further, there was one more thing she needed to sort out.

"Anne, do you have a moment?"

"...Yes? What is it, milady?" Anne gave her a curious look as she combed her still-wet hair. Though no longer apparent, Anne hadn't looked her usual self at the pond. Now seemed a good opportunity to ask if something was bothering her, but at the same time, a more cheerful atmosphere might be more conducive to a heartfelt talk. Mia considered her options.

"Would you mind if we went out shopping for a bit? Before the evening banquet?"

"No, that won't do! Your feet are still injured. Please stay here and rest until it's time to head out."

"Huh?"

Mia was taken aback by Anne's unusually stern refusal.

"Ah—"

Anne seemed equally surprised at her own outburst. Both of them froze for a moment. Then, after a quivering of her lips, Anne's head plunged downward in penitence, pulling her upper body along.

"I-I'm terribly sorry!"

She spun on her heels and made to leave the room.

"Wai— Anne! Stop!" Mia grabbed Anne's arm in a panic. "You can't

just run off on your own."

"I..."

This wasn't Saint-Noel or Lunatear. They were strangers in a foreign land. Heading out without a guide would doubtlessly leave her stranded and lost.

She glanced, eyes wide, back at Mia, who gave her a soft giggle and a small smile.

"You've been so reliable lately I almost forgot that deep down, you have a clumsy side. That was very reckless of you, you know?" said Mia. She closed her eyes before continuing. "But, well, you have a good point. If you tell me to rest here, then I'll rest here. Could I ask you to finish up my hair?"

"Yes, of course... I'm sorry." Anne bowed again. Her voice regained its earlier blueness.

"Tell me, Anne. Is something bothering you? You've looked down for the past while," asked Mia.

The question caused Anne's breath to catch. A few seconds later, words began trickling out of her quivering lips.

"When you...started walking on the wheat...I couldn't stop you. And as a result, your feet are... And I didn't even notice..."

"Ah, that's, uh...true. I'm very sorry I caused an undue amount of concern. I've reflected on my actions, and I do admit that I've been a little too reckless this time."

"That's...not all..." Anne's voice began trembling as well. "What Miss Tatiana said to you... It was something that I should have said. It's my responsibility to keep milady from overeating. But I didn't. I failed at my duty..." She hung her head. Tears began to well in her eyes. "I need to do better... Become like Miss Tatiana...and take care of your health..."

"Anne..." Mia gently placed a hand on Anne's shoulder. *Th-This is not good!*

On the inside, panic was taking hold. It took all her will to keep herself from digging her fingers into Anne's skin.

If Anne starts comparing herself to Tatiana, she might start refusing to let me have any sweets whatsoever! That would be an absolute nightmare!

Mia was of course aware of the dangers of surrounding herself with people who only said what she wanted to hear. She wanted Anne to speak

her mind and, if necessary, deliver frank admonishment. But on top of all of that, she also wanted Anne to spoil her just a little. The ideal Anne was one who fearlessly cautioned her when the need arose, but in all other situations, remained her usual self—that is, nice and forgiving when it came to indulging Mia's habits. Anne's thoughts were currently heading in a very undesirable direction. Somehow, she needed to pry Anne's thoughts away from Tatiana.

So, Mia mentally scrambled for options. Soon, she began smiling. It was the same smile she always wore when trying to fudge a difficult issue.

"Thank you for telling me your thoughts, Anne. I'm really glad you care about me so much. Despite that, there's something I must say." With her brain working at full power, she desperately pieced together the thing that must be said. "Tell me something, Anne. Who...are you?"

"Huh? I... I'm..."

"You...are yourself. You're not Tatiana, and you're not Ludwig. You are Anne. My right hand, my confidant, and the person I trust more than any other."

Anne wasn't Tatiana; they were different. Therefore, Anne didn't need to be so strict about eating sweets. That was the message Mia fervently wished to get across.

"I want you to be none other than yourself, standing by my side like you've always done. Of course, I won't stop you from improving your arithmetic, getting better at cooking, learning how to ride horses, or anything like that. But, there's absolutely no need for you to become someone else."

"M-Milady..."

Anne's eyes blinked a few times, shedding the tears that had been welling within. Mia gently brushed them from her cheeks with a finger and said, "Just always be yourself, all right, Anne? There is nothing that would make me happier."

"Yes... Yes, milady! Thank you very much..." said Anne, voice shaking with emotion.

Mia sighed inwardly, figuring her job here was done.

...But it wasn't nearly that simple.

"Your Highness, we have concluded our outing."

Ludwig returned with Bel and Tatiana under a vermillion sky.

"Oh, you're all back. Did you have fun?" asked Mia.

Bel swung her arms excitedly.

"It was *so* much fun, Miss Mia! I've never had anything so tasty in my life. I'm so full."

"My, is that so? What about tonight's banquet?"

"What about it?" asked Bel, as if it were the strangest question. "Oh, you mean my tummy? Come on, Miss Mia, everyone knows there's always room for dinner!"

Mia reflexively pinched the underside of Bel's upper arm and pulled probingly at the soft skin.

"Eeek! M-Miss Mia, that tickles!"

"This doesn't make any sense... Is it because she keeps swinging her arms around all the time? Ugh, how terribly upsetting..."

After grumbling under her breath, she turned to Ludwig.

"So, you went to survey the crops, right? How did it go?"

"Very well. As expected of Perujin, I discovered numerous crops I've never seen before," answered Ludwig, whose lips then tightened into a grimace. "I also...learned many things I didn't know about before. It is indeed as my master said—there is much in the world one cannot understand without seeing it in person. I...still have a long way to go."

"My, what's gotten into you?"

"I must apologize for my behavior earlier, Your Highness. I was unaware of the characteristics of wheat."

He hung his head, causing Mia to recoil slightly in surprise.

"Moons, what is happening? First Anne, now you?"

"...I'm sorry?"

"Uh, never mind." Mia gave her head a quick shake before letting out a droning, pensive *hmph*.

Huh. A despondent Ludwig. Now that's a rare sight. It's actually sort of fun, seeing him beat himself up...but I do need him to play an active role in the ensuing matters. More importantly...

She stole a glance at him as a sense of unease crept up on her.

For some reason, I have a bad feeling about all this...

By nature, Ludwig was a devotee of knowledge. While he performed brilliantly as a government official, he was fundamentally a scholarly type

who loved to study. That in itself was not concerning. The problem was that he was also keen on teaching others, and Mia knew all too well who tended to be on the receiving end when he decided to play teacher.

What happened earlier would have been impossible if anyone understood the characteristics of wheat. Oh, no! I can already see how this is going to end. In order to make sure I don't take another risk like this, he's going to make me study up on all sorts of things. I need to stop him from going down that line of thought!

Driven by a sense of impending crisis, she said, "Ludwig, I believe that it's ultimately impossible for a mere mortal to know everything there is to know in the world."

"Indeed. I am aware that even one such as yourself has gaps in your vast trove of knowledge. I am equally aware that it is my duty to fill those gaps, and yet..."

"Listen to me, Ludwig. I sought you for your knowledge. This is true. However, I have never asked you to become an omniscient seer. I know that there's very little I can do on my own. Naturally, I also don't ask you to be capable of doing everything, nor would I ever expect you to." Mia laid a hand over her chest. "Of course, I won't stop you from seeking knowledge to satisfy your love of learning. Personally, though... My goal has never been to become an all-knowing, all-capable being. I think it's fine to rely on others to compensate for my own shortcomings. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

Translating from Mia-speak, basically, she was saying that if Ludwig wanted to bury himself in books and study himself to death, then he was free to do that. She, however, was just going to save herself some pain and borrow other people's wisdom.

It was a bold statement, and one she delivered with panache.

It took a few seconds for Ludwig to regather his wits. Mia's statement had hit like a sack of bricks; it touched on something he'd never considered before. Until now, he'd always felt that he didn't care what he did, so long as he could serve the empire by working at Mia's side. Be it menial labor or physical toil, if it aided Mia, he'd do it willingly. That had been and still was how he operated. He'd effectively positioned himself as her all-rounder aide, running to and fro in service of whatever matter needed his attention

at the time. However...

Is Her Highness saying that...the role she wishes for me to fill isn't that of the all-rounder aide?

What Mia instead hinted at was someone who sought not specialized knowledge but the ability to gather and manage those who possessed it—the conductor to an orchestra of individually talented experts.

In other words, she wishes for me to step up to a position of greater power. To take on a leadership role. That of chancellor, for example...

Having spent so much of his time thinking about helping Mia become empress, it sounded to Ludwig like she was asking for a declaration of resolve. It was an "are you with me?" moment. Was he, she seemed to be asking, prepared to become someone who relied on delegation to fill his shortcomings? Not one of the empire's many talented specialists and capable officials, but the one who led them?

Chancellor of the Empire was a position traditionally reserved for peerage. Even with Mia's backing, it would be an extremely difficult title for a commoner like Ludwig to obtain. Furthermore, he'd have to first convince the very cohort of fellow disciples he'd rallied that he was fit to lead them. These were not people who accepted mediocrity from their superiors. If he wanted to wield authority over them, he'd have to prove his worth.

It was arguably an even taller order than working himself into the ground as Mia's hands and feet. Diligence and grit alone would no longer suffice. He needed to have an eye for people, demonstrate leadership, and approach subordinates with patience and forbearance.

I was the one who asked Sir Dion to go higher. To climb the precarious ladder of power. Perhaps the time has come for me to do the same.

Future scholars would mark this as the historic moment when the famed Chancellor of the Empire, Ludwig Hewitt, first set his sights on the position.

Thus, after many choice words, Mia successfully leveled up Anne's loyalty, Ludwig's resolve, and her own degree of hunger.

Ugh, there goes my chance to go on a shop-and-snack spree... There's only one thing to do now. I'm going to eat enough during the welcome banquet to make up for it!

Determined to come out with no regrets—stomach-wise, at least—Mia prepared to attend a most fateful banquet.

Chapter 23: The Fateful Banquet —To Start the Party, Knock Back Three...Mushrooms—

That night, Mia arrived at the evening banquet hosted by the King of Perujin. Stepping into a large gala chamber in the cake-shaped castle, she was greeted by long tables of mouth-watering food. She gulped.

In the middle of the edible display were the fresh veggies, boldly declaring their presence through their eye-catching green. Carefully carved into their leafy surfaces were marvelous floral patterns—a testament to the manual prowess of the cooks. Surrounding those were more vegetables. Some were much larger and used as substitute vessels for sauces, while others were grilled and arranged around the plant-based container. Presumably, the latter was meant to be dipped into the first. A whiff of charred goodness made her tummy gurgle.

There were even those tahkoes she had the other day, except splayed atop the flatbread this time were mushrooms.

My, so those are Perujin mushrooms. Oh, I can't wait to try those. I wonder how they taste...

She swallowed her anticipation along with a mouthful of saliva. Then, she gracefully greeted the king. "Your Majesty is most gracious to have arranged such a marvelous banquet for me. Please accept my gratitude."

"You flatter me, Princess Mia. It is but a token of our appreciation. We hope you find it satisfactory."

"Oho ho, you are far too modest. Satisfactory? I can hardly stop my heart from fluttering at the sight of this gorgeous assortment of lavish delicacies."

Technically, what was fluttering was probably her stomach. Having been denied the opportunity to satiate itself in a shop-and-snack spree, it was now all but growling for recompense. With her hunger-tinted glasses,

everything on the tables looked absolutely delicious.

At the king's side was the queen consort, and beside them were Rania and her younger brother. The boy looked even younger than Bel and Tatiana, putting him at no more than ten years of age. The way his eyes were glued to the food before him, tiny lips writhing as if struggling to prevent a wave of drool from spilling forth, was quite endearing.

Hmm, so that's Rania's mother and brother... They definitely resemble her a little.

Mia had no siblings, and her mother had already passed away. Her only family was her father, the emperor. She'd never felt lonely because of that, but seeing Rania surrounded by so much family, she couldn't help but mouth a private "it must be nice."

Nicer, however, was the food, so she promptly made her way to her seat, which was also beside the king, opposite his wife. Next to Mia was Bel's seat, and next again was Tatiana's. She was further supported by Anne and Ludwig, who both stood in attendance behind her. It was, in her opinion, a near perfect formation—the ultimate opening in the game that was about to ensue.

Well then. We're set and ready to go. Where might Shalloak be? Is he not here yet?

Judging by the current ordering, Shalloak would probably sit next to Rania's brother. She fixed her gaze on the unoccupied seat and waited until...

"I offer the deepest of apologies for my late arrival."

...Shalloak showed up. She greeted him with a small nod.

"What a pleasure it is to see you, Shalloak. It's been a while, hasn't it? Frankly, I didn't think we'd meet again."

"Indeed, indeed. It is an absolute honor to be invited to such an event. Please accept my deepest gratitude, Princess Mia."

Shalloak Cornrogue lived up to his reputation as a seasoned merchant. His businesslike smile displayed not the slightest hint of lingering rancor from their past confrontation.

"If I may be so bold, though... What prompted you to invite the likes of myself, a lowly merchant, to an occasion of this—"

Mia held up her hand, cutting off his question.

"I'd prefer to dine first. Let us get this banquet underway, shall we?"

It was a matter of priorities. Face-stuffing first, Shalloak-trouncing later. The latter could be done at any time, but the former was time-sensitive. Plus, the cooks had worked hard to prepare all this great food, and it'd be both disrespectful and a waste to let it go cold. Most importantly, her stomach had reached the limit of its patience. It demanded satisfaction *now*.

"The young prince there appears to be quite hungry, after all," she said, shifting attention to Rania's little brother.

Yes, she just wanted to start snarfing as soon as possible, but she wasn't about to admit that; she had appearances to keep up. The poor boy, unaware he was a sacrificial pawn in Mia's bid to save face, looked down and blushed. A gurgling sound promptly followed, dissipating the tension that had begun to form between princess and merchant.

"A fair suggestion," said Yuhal. "Let the feasting begin."

In a stately voice, the king signaled the commencement of the banquet.

Yuhal had barely finished his sentence before Mia started reaching for food. She began with the tahkoes. The yellowish flatbread had been cut into bite-size pieces, each overlaid with mushrooms and grilled. She took one and popped it into her mouth. Biting down, she felt a satisfying crunch as the crispy bread gave way. Savory mushroom touched her tongue, followed by a thick sauce. Her tongue waltzed in delight to the triplet of flavors.

Next, she picked up a mushroom skewer that used black ones larger than those in the tahkoe. Leaning in to sniff, her nose was tickled by an indescribably rich aroma. As she bit into a cap with her front teeth, she discovered a pleasing springiness; there was a bit of bounce before the flesh parted. Seasoning seemed to be limited to salt, which allowed the faint but complex flavor of the mushroom to shine.

She didn't stop there. Charging forward in her crusade against untasted food, she moved on to a roasted item consisting of mushrooms sandwiched between meat. As she chomped down, freshly broiled juices spilled out, accentuating the mushrooms' firm yet slightly crunchy texture. It was not just cuisine—it was an *experience.* She was only vaguely aware of her own voice as she chewed with rapt delight.

"What impeccable flavor... Please give my highest regards to the chef."

So pretentious was her tone that one would almost expect her to make a "mwah" gesture with her hand.

By the time she swallowed everything and returned to her senses, she realized that in the span of three gulps, she'd devoured three types of cuisine: mushroom, mushroom, and mushroom, fulfilling the ancient adage of drinking culture—to start the party, knock back three. Three *mushrooms* in this case, but whatever. In doing so, she'd activated the first of her secret techniques: the positive-feedback loop. The more she filled her stomach with mushrooms, the hungrier she got, logic and physiology be damned.

"Aaah... It's so good. They're all so good...! I can't get enough!"

"My goodness, Princess Mia, you seem to be enjoying yourself very much," said the queen consort with a good-natured smile.

"I certainly am, because the food is superb. The vegetables are incredibly fresh too, and the mushrooms are simply exquisite. A country of such rich produce as Perujin is one I hope to maintain a long and lasting friendship with..." said Mia, pointedly glancing at Shalloak.

The merchant paid her no mind, choosing to focus his attention on devouring the platters of food before him. Food that consisted of nothing but meat. Food that...Tatiana eyed with a deeply disapproving frown.

Chapter 24: The Fateful Banquet —Like a Thorn Stuck in the Heart—

"Your Majesty, I must thank you again for arranging such a wonderful dinner banquet." Mia was currently in tip-top form. The fullness of her stomach was reflected in her readiness to fight. It was time to step up to the ring, and she couldn't be more primed to deliver a knockout performance. Moreover, she had her trusty aides Ludwig and Anne at her side. If push came to shove, Rania would probably take her side as well. Then, on top of all that, she had her trump card, Tatiana.

Even the queen consort and her young son were warming to her after witnessing the unreserved ferocity with which she attacked her food.

I've totally got this in the bag! There's no way I can lose!

She felt like a great general who'd surrounded a force of ten thousand with a hundred thousand. Moments away from completely annihilating the enemy, she looked at Yuhal with the confidence of someone convinced that victory was hers.

"You are too kind," said Yuhal. "This is the least we can do to show our appreciation for your generosity in visiting us personally during the Thanksharvest Festival."

Mia smiled at the ever humble king. "And you are too humble. Tearmoon and Perujin share a bond, just as Princess Rania and I. I owe much to Princess Arshia as well. There was never any doubt I'd attend. I only hope that my visit will further strengthen the mutual trust we already enjoy..."

She slipped a bit of diplomacy into her small talk, emphasizing the friendly relations the two nations have shared so far. It also served to coax the king away from working with Shalloak. Rather, that was what she'd hoped her statement would do.

"Mutual trust, you say... Mutual trust indeed..." The king, however, grimaced. His expression bothered Mia, but she couldn't afford to stop now.

“Yes, it is the basis of our friendly relations. However, I must confess that recently, I’ve heard some nasty rumors that have left me very concerned. Apparently, there is talk about raising the price of wheat sold to Tearmoon in response to a famine?”

“...Is there? How curious. I haven’t the slightest idea about that. I’ve heard talks of a famine, but is it not true that no one can know for certain whether a famine is coming?” asked Yuhal with an expression of patently artificial surprise.

“Let us cut to the chase, Your Majesty. Feigning ignorance benefits neither of us. Surely Perujin has already noticed the signs. Am I wrong? Wheat harvests have been on the decline since last year. It is certainly true that an opportunity exists right now to raise prices and make a handsome profit, but people will go hungry as a result. I cannot say for certain where this idea originated, but if it is from that Shalloak fellow, I must warn you that he is—”

She was about to say “untrustworthy, because he’s actually a total softie at heart!” but the king cut her off with a laugh.

“Hah, I see, I see. Your love for your people is a sight to behold, Princess Mia. How very noble of you.”

His statement caught her by surprise. She could only blink in response.

“Saint indeed,” he continued. “Benevolent and compassionate, and thinks of her people. You maintain the image well. What you did last winter—that was an impressive gambit as well. So much so that you seem to have even won the trust of my daughter with it. The performance with the wheat earlier too... You seem to have a way with hearts, Princess Mia, and manipulating them at will. An extraordinary talent, given your age. The young are not to be underestimated, are they? Hah.” Yuhal chuckled softly before adding, “Is that it then? To ensure that people do not go hungry? That is a just cause with which you intend to bind us. Did you think I would simply nod and smile so long as the pretense is noble?”

Hm...

Mia noticed that his words had thorns. In fact, they’d been thorny ever since the moment she mentioned mutual trust. It wasn’t the overt hostility of a pointed sword—rather, it was a barb. A spine. Too small and too thin to be easily noticed. If his words were wheat, this was the thorns. They were dangerous thorns that would lead to much pain and suffering later if she

stepped across them carelessly. She needed to watch her step and approach them with the utmost care.

With her danger sensors wailing in her head, Mia quietly reached her hand across the table...toward a large stack of fruits! The plan, as usual, was to recharge her brain through sweets. She popped some Perujin berries into her mouth. Their sweet-and-sour tang immediately kicked the slumbering parts of her noggin awake. Freshly sugared, she studied the faces of Yuhal and Shalloak with renewed focus. A thought came to her.

What if the empire's reputation was even worse than she'd thought? She'd figured people trusted the empire about as much as they would a sketchy merchant like Shalloak. That reasoning had led her to conclude that eroding just a bit of their trust in him would tip the scales in her favor and keep them from betraying Tearmoon. Had her assumption been too optimistic?

She bit her lip. If so, then it would be an egregious instance of overconfidence. War was not won through rosy assumptions. Her hundred thousand-strong army turned out to be mostly new recruits and hapless rookies. There were only a handful of proper soldiers—about as many as her foe. In terms of fighting strength, they were actually evenly matched!

Worse yet, she'd rode to this battle without committing any more thought to her battle plan than "I'll just swoop in and snatch victory."

What a terrible blunder! This doesn't bode well!

Desperate for a way out of this predicament, she racked her brains, but Yuhal did not give her enough time to formulate a plan.

"Trust? For the people? There is no need for such lip service. If you wish to twist my arm, then by all means, go right ahead and try. Bring your military and force your will upon us. We both know Perujin does not have the strength to defy you."

Aaah, but that would defeat the point. If I hold someone down by force, when the force is gone, they'll immediately turn on me. They'll become my enemy when I'm at my weakest, which is literally the worst possible outcome. Grrr... Stupid Tearmoon nobles. I know they've always been jerks, but I didn't expect them to have done this *much damage!*

Suddenly finding herself on the back foot, she silently cursed her fellow aristocrats before continuing to agonize over the distressful situation their poor attitudes had put her in.

“That’s not true, father.”

Just then, reinforcements arrived, and from the least expected direction at that. A woman’s voice sounded from the entrance of the banquet hall.

“Arshia? You’re back?”

The second princess of Perujin, Arshia Tafrif Perujin, stood in the doorway.

“Greetings, father. I’ve missed you.”

Rania let out a breath of relief at the appearance of her sister, for she was the one who’d asked her to come.

Originally, Arshia had planned to forgo her homecoming this summer. Her work as a lecturer at Saint Mia Academy kept her plenty busy, and that was on top of the crucial mission Mia had entrusted her with—improving wheat strains through selective breeding research. The Thanksharvest Festival was an important event in Perujin, but the dance could be performed by Rania. Figuring she’d let her little sister handle things this year, she’d sent a letter explaining her intention not to return home, only to receive an unexpected response.

Father was acting weird, so I figured I’d ask her to come back just in case. Wow am I ever glad I did that.

“Ah, you’ve come home. I see that you’re in good health,” said a surprised Yuhal. “But didn’t you send word informing us that you wouldn’t be able to return?”

“Yes, but there’s something I need to speak to you about, so I came back.”

“You need to speak to me, you say...”

Rania pointedly ignored the reproving glance from her father and popped a piece of fruit into her mouth as if she had no idea what was going on. Besides, she didn’t think she did anything wrong.

I mean, no matter how you look at it, we’re far better off having Princess Mia on our side.

She was sure of it. Their earlier conversation in the room resurfaced in her mind, during which Mia had said their approach to persuasion boiled down to one word—trust. She’d explicitly stated that she had no intention of compelling Perujin to obey through pure force. Rania had been there, and she’d heard it with her own ears.

Rania then looked toward the young man standing behind Mia. Though partially obscured by his glasses, his gaze was nevertheless sharp and attentive. This was Ludwig, one of Mia's most trusted subjects, and he'd been one of the first to speak. When she'd first heard what he had to say, she could barely contain her astonishment. What soon followed was a hot wave of indignation. She'd had to force herself to keep quiet, but inside, she was fuming, thinking *a man like this who'd suggest using threats against us isn't worthy of being Mia's subject!*

Now, however, it was painfully clear to her what his intention had been. He'd purposefully affronted her so she could hear Mia's true thoughts. As a result, Mia had made her stance absolutely clear, leaving no room for any doubt in Rania's mind.

A man of sufficient intelligence to serve so closely at her side... I wonder what he sees through those glasses of his. It must be the unshakable truths of the world. Truths I can't even begin to fathom with my limited knowledge...

While Rania was having her private moment of awe, Arshia and Yuhal's conversation continued.

"I've been teaching agriculture to children at Princess Mia's academy, father."

"So I've heard."

"You have? Then, have you also heard that at her command, I've been researching how to grow wheat that's resistant to cold?"

"Wheat...resistant to cold?"

Yuhal drew back, bewilderment as evident in his expression as it was on all the other Perujin faces in attendance. Even Shalloak stared in shock. Arshia took a deep bow, then turned to Mia.

"My apologies for asking after the fact, Princess Mia, but is it all right for me to inform my father of my research?"

The sight of her sister going out of her way to ask an odd question bore so much resemblance to the scene currently occupying Rania's thoughts that she reflexively made a connection. *Oh, I know what this is... Arshia's trying to do the same thing as Ludwig.*

Arshia already knew what Mia was after. She understood what drove her to push for the development of cold-resistant wheat. She was even aware of what she intended to do with the knowledge gained.

Wheat that can survive in the cold... If such a thing existed, it would be an extremely powerful weapon to have during famines caused by cold-damaged crops. While other nations struggled with poor harvests, the one in possession of this strain would enjoy normal yields. Therefore, knowledge of such a matter would normally be kept secret; it was definitely not something that should be disclosed in a place like this.

At least, that was what Perujin common sense dictated.

"Hm? Why wouldn't it be all right?"

Mia arched an eyebrow, despite the calm reaction being completely incongruent with the fact that extremely sensitive information concerning Tearmoon's national interest had just been revealed. She was so calm, in fact, that it almost seemed like she didn't fully appreciate the gravity of what had just occurred. After making sure Yuhal got a good look at Mia's clueless expression, Arshia continued.

"With the help of my students at the academy, I've been researching strains of wheat that can grow in the cold. Every bit of progress we make...is a step toward realizing my childhood dream of eradicating hunger from the world. I believe it's very meaningful work."

"Nonsense... Wheat that can grow in the cold? Such a thing can't possibly exist."

"How odd of you to say that," said Mia, wading into the conversation. "Cold-resistant wheat definitely exists, and Arshia and Cyril will definitely find a way to grow it."

She spoke with conviction—no, with *certainty*—as if she possessed knowledge of the future. It was a display of supreme confidence in Arshia's abilities. Faced with the fact that a Tearmoon princess apparently trusted his daughter more than he did, Yuhal fell into a chagrined silence. After some time, he said, "But even so, it serves only Tearmoon's interest. Yes, it is true that if cold-resistant wheat is developed, people will buy it to survive. There will be great demand, and Tearmoon, being the one who has the wheat, will easily monopolize the profits."

"Princess Mia intends to share knowledge of the wheat with all neighboring nations." Not missing a beat, Arshia immediately countered her father's point. "What will it take to convince you that she is acting for the greater good? Why do you think she's letting me do all the talking?"

"Arshia speaks true," said Rania.

She stood up, realizing that if there was ever a time for her to talk about what Mia had done for her, it was now.

"Princess Mia was an enlightening presence for me too. She told me that after Arshia succeeds in developing the wheat, I should help spread the word about it throughout the continent. At a time when I was looking for direction in my life, she showed me a way forward—a *meaningful* way forward."

Even now, Rania could see the radiant path in her mind. It was one she could be proud of herself for walking, for it led to a brighter future. Above it shone the light of the Great Sage of the Empire, forever a beacon in her life.

"Why would— That's folly... Even if cold-resistant wheat could be developed, no ruler would just hand that expertise to other nations. It's too important... Impossible..."

For Yuhal, whose goal had always been to bring wealth to Perujin through agriculture, the logic simply didn't compute. Agricultural technology was priceless for Perujin; it was both their treasure and their weapon. He couldn't bring himself to accept the thought that Tearmoon would be willing to give away something so important.

"If necessary, she can take the results of her research back to Perujin," said Mia. "Arshia *is* a Perujin princess, after all. If she makes a useful discovery in Tearmoon, it'd only be natural for her to want to apply it to her own country's agriculture."

Her smile was relaxed. Compassionate, almost.

"This is just an idea for now, but with your permission, I'd also like to borrow some Perujin land and grow cold-resistant wheat here as well. In my opinion, working collaboratively on this research project will have a positive, meaningful impact for both our nations."

At this point, even Yuhal had no choice but to accept that Mia was serious about making sure that people didn't go hungry—not just her own people, but the people of all nearby nations.

He'll understand. He must. This must have convinced him...

Rania's fervent hope would unfortunately be betrayed.

"If you are truly a princess who cares about all people...then why? Why do you keep silent? Why do you condone Tearmoon's treatment of Perujin? Is it because deep down, you wish for us to remain as we have...as slaves to

your empire?” asked the King of Perujin, his voice shaking a little as he forced the words through clenched teeth.

Chapter 25: Could You Please Place Your Trust in Me?

Ludwig heard the subdued protest for what it was—the residual emotion of a harrowing scream that came from deep within the king's heart. He felt the pain and frustration in Yuhal's words, for he was well aware of the existence of a treaty between the empire and Perujin that was undeniably unfair to the latter. He knew there was a problem. He understood the injustice. Nevertheless, he'd chosen to turn a blind eye...because what else *could* he do? It was beyond his ability to solve.

Of course, that was an inherently Tearmoon-sided view. Perujin sentiment on the issue differed significantly.

"For countless years, we've been forced by our treaty with Tearmoon to sell our wheat to you at unreasonably low prices. So long as your empire stands, we will forever be mocked as a country of serfs. Say what you want, but no amount of lofty rhetoric will change this fact," declared the king.

It was indeed an unchangeable fact. Convincing Perujin to see the issue differently was impossible. Winning their trust, doubly so. Nothing could be done...except to sigh with reluctant resignation and look away.

Unless, apparently, you're Mia.

"I see... There's a treaty like that..." Mia mused for no more than the span of a single breath. "In that case, we should abolish this treaty."

She said it as if it were the most natural thing in the world. As if it weren't a matter of mind-boggling complexity involving innumerable matters of national interest such that only a clueless fool would suggest it so readily. Or perhaps...as if the moral truth of it being *the right thing to do* was so self-evident that any other reaction was unthinkable.

So declared Mia that the treaty should be abolished. Half the hall froze at her words. The ranks of the petrified included Yuhal, Shalloak, and even Ludwig, the last of which was the first to recompose himself.

"Your Highness, you must realize..."

Mia met his gaze and nodded.

"Yes, of course. I'm aware that the decision for a matter like this does not rest with me. The most I can do is to push for its abolishment back home..." she said, qualifying her statement for Yuhal.

Then, she turned back to him and said, "Can it be done, Ludwig?"

You're asking me*?!*

How had this become *his* job all of a sudden? Half his brain wanted to flip a table and scream. The other half beat it into submission to maintain some semblance of composure. After stifling the sudden desire to upend furniture, he forced himself to think, to discern the intent behind Mia's words. The task they spoke of was in no way something he could possibly accomplish, and yet, she'd still said it. There had to be a reason.

First, he considered the moral aspect. In that sense, what she suggested was undoubtedly correct. There definitely existed an unfair treaty between Tearmoon and Perujin that effectively made serfs of the latter's people. Though a tad oversimplified, it could be said that the treaty primarily existed to ensure that the empire could always purchase the wheat it required from Perujin at a bargain. Every year, the two nations would go through the motions of negotiating prices, but the stark difference in military power meant that for all intents and purposes, it was the empire setting the prices and Perujin reluctantly nodding along.

This was the exact dynamic that Shalloak had set his sights on. His plan involved incrementally raising prices over time, keeping each increase small enough to avoid provoking a military intervention from Tearmoon. Then, as Tearmoon began struggling with food shortages, Perujin could begin forcing concessions from them.

All in all, the Perujin perspective was that vast amounts of their land was effectively occupied by Tearmoon to grow wheat for them, which they then bought at dirt-cheap prices. Adding insult to injury was that after exporting the wheat for minimal profit, they then had to suffer the empire's mockery of the fruits of their hard work. In that sense, allowing such a dynamic to persist uncorrected was patently unfair.

Mia's vision was to forge a bond of mutual trust with Perujin. To that end, the treaty was also an obvious obstacle. Abolishing it, in that sense, was indeed the simplest and most logical option.

The problem is the feasibility...

As she'd stated herself, Mia did not have the authority to abolish treaties; that was a matter handled by the highest offices of both parties. The emperor's obsessive fervor was certainly a powerful card, but it did not surpass the limits of her station as princess. Mere princesses did not dictate foreign policy, no matter how spoiled they were.

But Mia...was no mere princess. Her influence was nearly unparalleled not just within the empire but throughout the continent. Saint Rafina of Belluga, Prince Sion of Sunkland, Prince Abel of Remno... So long as Mia was trying to do the right thing, they would all give her their unconditional support. The young scions of the Four Houses, if prodded, would likely back her as well. Furthermore, Mia was currently overwhelmingly popular with the people.

If she were to push for some form of action, it would not simply be the will of the Tearmoon princess. Behind her loomed the towering clout of all her allies. Whether she had the technical authority to enact a policy would be irrelevant. A mere indication of intent from her held more sway than the moon ministers, the chancellor...and in some cases, possibly even the emperor himself.

The feasibility...was certainly not low.

Most importantly, the empire is *in need of reformation...*

As he worked through the logic, Ludwig reluctantly realized that he was starting to convince himself. If they wanted to reshape the empire for the better, what Mia proposed to do was unquestionably necessary. The reason was simple; as long as the treaty with Perujin existed, Tearmoon nobles wouldn't bother using more of their land for farming. Why would they, when they could import wheat from Perujin for cheap? If this notion couldn't be eliminated for good, increasing the empire's food self-sufficiency rate would remain a pipe dream. Reducing dependence on Perujin was therefore the fastest way to reforming the empire's agricultural tendencies.

It's such a clear-cut line of logic. The kind they love to see...

He thought of the fellow members of his cohort—the ones he'd recently gathered to request their assistance. If he could get Wiseman Galv's pupils to understand what Mia was thinking about and convince them it was necessary, they'd undoubtedly throw their full administrative might behind

the effort. It'd be a match made in heaven. These were people who hungered for places to apply their talent. The only thing he'd have to worry about was reminding them to eat and sleep while they bustled about.

It was likely that sooner or later, the momentum they'd generate would reach those who did have the power to enact and revoke treaties.

Therefore, if the question is whether or not it can be done...then the answer is yes, it can.

There was a moral reason as well as a rational need to get it done. They even had the power to do so.

So that's why... That's why she brought this up now of all times.

Ludwig knew full well that large-scale reform was always accompanied by significant pushback. It was good for everyday life to be peaceful, but an enduring peace was also a state of stoppage. The same kind of days—the same kind of *years*—just went on and on in a cycle of inertial monotony. The sense that things did not change, that the world remained still, was a source of comfort and relief for the masses.

Shaking things up—that is, introducing motion into a still system—would always meet with opposition. An unchanging life was a familiar one; it offered peace of mind. Change represented a path toward the unknown, and there was never any guarantee that what lay at the end was better. Rather, even if it *was* better, more just, and entirely correct, there would still be a large and very loud group of opposing voices. Humans were fundamentally conservative creatures that feared change.

Hence his own reluctance. Mere minutes ago, he'd had plenty of reasons to oppose this idea. It wasn't hard to see that what Mia was trying to do would earn her the ire of not only nobles but the masses. But...and this was one big but...

Right now... Specifically right now, during this very particular moment, those reasons I had for opposing the idea do not apply.

Forcing change into the peaceful rhythm of everyday life was hard. Yet change was also something that occurred on its own. In fact, it was occurring right now without any intervention from Mia. The *times* themselves were changing—the agent being famine. Every nation in the continent would soon have no choice but to adapt. Change would become inevitable, meaning Mia's proposal would...

She's riding the wave. We're entering a period of upheaval when all

sorts of things will change, and she intends to use this chance to reform the entire empire in one fell swoop.

She wasn't going to take a broken, famine-stricken nation and restore it to its original glory. She wanted to remake it into something new. Half-hearted measures wouldn't do; they'd only run themselves aground. This fact was now patently clear to him. No, it had always been, but it lay in a corner of his mind just dim enough for him to pretend he didn't see it. Then, Mia came along and poked a hole in the roof, inviting the light of truth to illuminate every recess. There was nowhere left for his ignorance to hide.

The famine will force the attention of nobles and commoners alike on food self-sufficiency. It will instill a sense of urgency. She doubtlessly intends to push everything through in one go while the topic remains at the forefront of public consciousness.

As the dizzying scope of Mia's grand vision revealed itself to him in his mind, he couldn't help but feel a sense of vertigo. Nothing, not the world and times, not even the current of history itself was too vast for her to consider.

Rely on others. Use the talents of others. I see now why she gave me that advice. A plan of this scale and scope is indeed far beyond my ability to realize alone.

As he put his racing thoughts in order, he began to speak.

"Well... Within the empire, I am currently pushing for more land to be converted to farm use. Having more farmland will inevitably result in the empire importing less wheat. It will be a gradual process, but revising the terms of the treaty with Perujin should ultimately be possible. Slowly, we can reduce the amount of wheat we demand..."

Being extra careful with his wording, Ludwig proceeded to explain his thought process. The kind of reformation he envisioned would take years. Over time, however, Perujin's exports to the empire would decrease, allowing them to sell more wheat to other nations at market price. Perujin would enjoy increased profits, and tension between the two nations should ease. With less land needed to grow wheat for the empire, they could also repurpose it...

But that is a domestic affair. It would be up to the Perujin people to decide what to do with their land.

He had no idea how the pieces would ultimately fall at the end of this

long process of change. With Perujin lacking military power, their need for Tearmoon's protection might continue to put them at some degree of a disadvantage during negotiations. With that said, reforming a nation should always be a stepwise process. Expecting every injustice to be righted immediately was unrealistic. Still, there would be progress, and with progress, hope. So long as the state of things improved year after year, even if only a little, it would be a significant source of hope for Perujin's farmers. The long stagnancy they suffered would be broken. Optimism would begin to draw them forward. Though slow, every step they took would be a meaningful one in the march of progress.

Eventually, Perujin Agricultural Country and the Tearmoon Empire would enjoy a mutually beneficial partnership. Mia's grand vision for the two nations was one that was established upon a win-win relationship.

After Ludwig finished his explanation, Yuhal's jaw remained slack until he was roused from his stunned silence by Mia's calm voice.

"However... None of this will happen anytime soon. Like I mentioned previously, a famine is coming, and it will last years. Even if we increased the amount of farmland in the empire, I doubt there will be enough time for us to reach the necessary scale..." She took a moment to look Yuhal in the eyes. "Therefore, the only thing I can offer right now is a verbal promise. Given that, I now ask you a great favor. Could you please place your trust in me, Your Majesty?"

What she asked was whether he would take her at her word...and ultimately, whether he was willing to return to a blank slate and forge a new bond of trust with the empire.

Chapter 26: Great General Mia Takes No Prisoners

Huh... I think I did it.

Mia took a look at Yuhal's expression and suppressed a smirk. She'd come here prepared to give Shalloak a thorough trouncing, figuring it was the only way to get what she wanted. Given the way things were playing out, though, it didn't even seem necessary. She seemed on the verge of total victory already.

The Arshia and Rania reinforcements were definitely pivotal in turning the tide. Moons, so many people are willing to come to my aid. It must be my integrity and natural virtue. Sometimes, I scare myself with how charismatic I am!

Presumably, the smug grin that had formed on her face was the result of her integrity and moral virtue too.

Also, it hardly bears mentioning, but she definitely did not have any intricate plans or grand visions. Nothing Ludwig talked about had ever crossed her mind. Mia's thought process was always very simple. No matter how deep it might seem, it was simple all the way down. The epitome of Mianess was to engage in multiplicative thinking...except every element was equal to one. One times one times one is still one. And the one thing her simple mind was focused on was the trust between Tearmoon and Perujin.

Perujin enjoyed a wealth of agricultural produce, ensuring they had some to spare even during years of poor harvest. Maintaining a friendly relationship with a neighbor that had lots of food would surely prove useful in a pinch. However, there existed a treaty that was getting in the way of that friendly relationship. What was to be done then? How would Mia deal with this issue? Simply, of course; if there was a rock in her way, she'd kick it. Sure, said rock might hit somebody on the head and cause a lot of trouble for everyone involved, but that was a future Mia problem. Heck, it was a

Ludwig problem, really, because future Mia would surely just pass the buck to him. For her, the foot was the best solution to all obstacles. Simple is best!

As a result of her application of this principle, the king's attitude seemed to be softening. Surely, this was a sign that momentum was now on her side. Just as she was about to engage in her usual wave-riding, however...

"No contract, no written vow. Nothing but a verbal promise... Surely, the King of Perujin is not so imprudent as to operate on blind faith?"

Shalloak's disgruntled voice echoed through the hall, and the wave petered out.

Shalloak was just as if not more astonished than Yuhal. Unlike the king, he had no idea any of this was going to happen. Every step of the proceedings had caught him completely off guard, from Princess Mia's early arrival to her inviting him to this banquet. Thinking back, he realized that he should have smelled the fishiness in the invitation the moment he'd gotten it. No, he simply didn't *want* to attend in the first place, for doing so would suggest that Mia had seen through all his clandestine maneuvering and had already prepared a countermeasure to win over the Perujin king.

None of this overly serious conversation was even necessary. All the king had to do was verbally promise he'd continue dealing with Tearmoon the same way as before, and add a simple clause that if famine were to occur and force prices up, they'd be given a chance to renegotiate to some degree. A simple exchange like that would have been more than sufficient to settle the matter for now.

Instead, the king had fully engaged with her proposal, and the reason was undoubtedly something she'd said.

Mutual trust as the basis of friendly relations.

The sheer shamelessness of the phrase was staggering. It was the kind of empty talk that no reasonable person who understood the dynamics between Tearmoon and Perujin would say out loud for fear of being seen as a fool. Hearing it from the lips of the princess of Tearmoon doubled its hypocrisy to the point of malice. There was no way Yuhal could overlook that; it rubbed him in all the wrong ways.

What the king should have done was hide his rage behind a false smile. Glossing over the matter was easily his best option. A conspiracy could not

be proven if it only existed in the mind. Give no hints. Let nothing slip. Fill the time with idle chatter. *That* was the path to success.

But the princess took no prisoners in her quest for victory. She pared away his facade with the precision of a chef and intentionally drew his ire. Once the emotionally engaged Yuhal stepped into the field, it was all Mia's game from there. With allies jumping in left and right, Shalloak had no chance to get his own words in.

What separated him and the princess, Shalloak realized to his own frustration, was a gap in their respective resolutions. He'd come as a spectator, intending to enjoy a good meal and dodge some uncomfortable questions—running the timer, essentially. Yet Mia had arrived as a fighter with only one goal in mind: a knockout victory.

And fight she did, striking at every source of mistrust the king harbored against Tearmoon—the crucial pillars of Shalloak's plan—until they crumbled. Then, she went for the jugular.

"Could you please place your trust in me, Your Majesty?"

She asked for his trust. For him to believe in her. To accept her sincerity.

"Surely, the King of Perujin is not so imprudent as to operate on blind faith?"

Shalloak's protest rang hollow even to his own ears. He could tell the king had already fallen under the Great Sage of the Empire's spell. And what a tantalizing spell it was, for it was woven through the light of hope.

She does her worst at the worst timing possible. So that's how the great sage operates... Well played.

"Oh, and Shalloak? I'd like to have a word with you as well." Suddenly, she turned her attention to him. "You do remember our previous conversation where I told you that money isn't everything, yes? Now what was it that you said to me in response?" She theatrically pressed a finger to her cheek and tilted her head. "Oh, wasn't it something about how doing things that make no money is a sign of being caught up in sentimental wish-wash? That it's a sign of weakness?"

"That is correct, Your Highness. Merchants are people who devote their faith to money. It rules everything in the world with its power, and it is our god."

Even as he answered, Shalloak could tell that he was losing his cool. He even knew why. Mia's claim that money wasn't everything and her actions

that backed it up... It flew in the face of everything he believed in. It repudiated his entire way of life. And most importantly, it stung like salt in a small wound in the back of his mind, the pain constantly reminding him that maybe, just maybe, he'd been wrong about everything...

Despite being fully aware that he was succumbing to the same manipulation as Yuhal had, there was nothing he could do to stop himself. "Shouldn't merchants—no, shouldn't *all* people subscribe to this belief? People work. What is it that they work for, then? Money, clearly. Therefore, doing everything they can to maximize the rate at which they make money is objectively correct."

He'd dedicated his whole life to making money, and so should all merchants. Using every last bit of strength and wit to place oneself on the most efficient route to maximum profit... That was the point of merchanting. It had to be.

It was why the open, free-of-charge dissemination of lucrative information like the development of cold-resistant wheat was an unforgivable act of blasphemy.

"Objectively correct? How curious... I have it on good authority that in the past, you were quite the— Oh? Is something the matter?"

Mia frowned. Shalloak did too. For a brief moment, he wasn't sure what she meant. The next second, an excruciating jolt of pain shot through his chest.

"Augh! Ugh..."

"Master Shalloak!"

He heard the frantic scream of a young girl. Then, he heard nothing more.

Chapter 27: Princess Mia...Pumps Her Arms

When Shalloak Cornrogue began to fall, the first to her feet was Tatiana. She rushed to his side, trying and failing to support his large frame. He collapsed, taking her with him, but even as they toppled, she made sure to place her arms between the ground and his head. Then, she crawled out from under him and tilted his head to keep his airway open. What followed next was a series of brisk commands to those around her, instructing them to help with first aid. The speed and confidence with which she'd acted left Mia staring in gaping-mouthed awe.

The abruptness of the development didn't help either. Mia had backed Shalloak into a corner, ready to deliver a brilliant coup de grâce to his reputation. The last thing she'd expected was to go for her opponent's jugular, only to have him collapse before tasting blood. As she watched four men struggle in concert to carry him away, she turned to Tatiana.

"Do you think he'll be okay?"

"Oh, um, probably... I think it's a transient attack. His breathing has steadied, so as long as he gets some rest..."

"An attack? Is it some sort of illness?"

"We won't know whether it's an illness without an examination. I've heard about this kind of attack, though. Apparently, there was a wealthy noble in some kingdom who died after experiencing something very similar. They ate a lot of rich foods, stayed indoors all the time, and didn't exercise at all." Tatiana frowned and folded her arms. "In other words, eating too much and not exercising enough leads to this kind of illness."

Mia listened intently while subconsciously stroking her tummy.

Eating too much...and not exercising enough?

"Fortunately, it's not too late yet. I, um... May I be excused, Your Highness? I'd like to check on Master Shalloak."

"Huh? Oh, sure," said Mia, snapping back to attention. "You'd want to

see how he's doing, of course. Go ahead." She hastily nodded, then palpated her belly once more. "Hmm... Say, where is the treatment room they took Shalloak to? Ah, it's in the castle but a little far from here. Hm, hm, I see... How convenient. Yes, check on him indeed..." She kept nodding, but the gesture now turned pensive. "In that case, I'll go with you, Tatiana."

"Huh? You will? Why?"

Tatiana stared in surprise at Mia, who quickly angled her body to hide her stomach from the girl's innocent but curious gaze.

"Why? Well... How should I put this...?"

Telling the truth was not an option. She wasn't about to admit to developing a sudden interest in before-bedtime exercise. Her sense of pride wouldn't let her. Withholding this, however, meant she had no justification to check on Shalloak. There was nothing she could do for him there, not to mention their rivalry. She had no obligation to visit. Unless she had a very good reason, common sense dictated that she was expected to remain here and continue the discussion with Yuhal. After some brow furrowing and lip pursing, she voiced her reason.

"It's because...Shalloak is weakening."

That's right. Great General Mia knew that there was no place for mercy in war. Every opening the enemy exposed should be pounced on and exploited for all its worth. Currently, Shalloak was in a weak position. Therefore, now was the time to finish him off for good, ensuring he'd never pose a threat to the empire again.

It was definitely *not* because she wanted to exercise. No, this was Mia walking resolutely toward her final showdown! It was what she told herself anyway.

"Which means..." She smiled at her secret weapon. "It looks like it's your time to shine at last, Tatiana."

This was why she'd brought the girl along—as the final nail in Shalloak's coffin—and it was time to hammer her in. Mia would brandish her before him and declare, "Behold, Shalloak, for her existence puts the lie to your claims! You have no right calling yourself a ruthlessly rational merchant. You're nothing but a *mundane* human being with all the weakness, sentimentality, and compassion of normal people."

This dramatic flourish would require Tatiana's cooperation, so to ensure

she wouldn't get cold feet, Mia looked her in the eyes and said, "I'm counting on you, Tatiana. Make me proud."

"Your Highness..."

Hearing Mia's words, Tatiana felt like a missing piece of a puzzle finally fell into place. Everything Mia had said to her so far... It all made sense now.

She saw Master Shalloak's weakening health and wanted to wish him well in person!

Judging by their prior exchange, it was clear that Mia and Shalloak did not exactly see eye to eye. Rather, they looked very much like enemies. Tatiana had therefore expected Mia to use her as a weapon against him. But that wasn't the case.

Her Highness is trying to save Master Shalloak!

What had been numerous disconnected events suddenly joined into a single whole, revealing a full, interconnected pattern. Back at Crolio Pond, Mia had said that she appreciated Tatiana's willingness to give admonishment when necessary. She'd commended her frankness. Then, she'd told Tatiana to go to her if she ever ran into trouble. It was now clear to Tatiana that Mia had been encouraging her, trying to push her forward.

More of Mia's words began echoing in her mind. She'd said that it would all depend on how Shalloak chose to act. How prescient she'd been! She was clearly referring to this exact eventuality. Mia had known all along that Shalloak's health would suffer if he didn't change his dietary habits. That was why she brought Tatiana along—to give the necessary admonishment and persuade him to lead a healthier life.

And that's not all. I think she might be trying to help Master Shalloak remember...

Mia's goal was twofold. Through Tatiana, she wished to warn him about his health and preserve his life. In the process, she was hoping that he'd remember the wonderful things he'd done in the past. Health of body *and* health of mind. She wanted to restore both to him.

Tatiana couldn't help but feel she'd happened upon Mia's true intentions.

On the surface, she says it all depends on how he chooses to act, but behind the scenes...she's doing everything she can to save Master Shalloak

from self-destruction and bring him back onto the correct path forward.

This approach, it occurred to her, had much in common with the practice of medicine. Whether Shalloak chooses a life of moderation was certainly up to him. The quality of his health and the length of his life were ultimately dependent on the choices he made.

"But choices can be influenced."

There was no need or reason to simply give up. Those unwilling to listen could still be told and told again. With enough time, one day, they might finally be persuaded. Not necessarily because they were moved by the display of dogged earnestness, but simply because they were sick and tired of hearing the same nagging advice and comply just to get it to stop.

It all depends on Master Shalloak... At first, Her Highness's words sound cold and uncaring...

But now, Tatiana felt a deep gratitude. She wanted to thank Mia from the bottom of her heart...for bringing her here to this critical crossroads and giving her a chance to save Shalloak Cornrogue, the man who'd changed her life!

"All right, Your Highness. Let's go."

When she looked toward Mia, she found her pumping her arms for some reason. It was curiously similar to the motion frequently practiced by the other young girl following her, Bel, and there was something strangely...exercise-y about it.

Chapter 28: Thread

Down and down Shalloak fell into a deep and unending darkness. It was an empty world without sight, without sound, without smell or taste or even warmth.

I see... So this is what it's like to die...

He'd reached the last stop. His life would now end. *Everything* would end. The plans he had for tomorrow, the goods he was preparing to sell... It would all be for naught. Severed forever from existence. Faced with this reality, Shalloak found himself unexpectedly shaken.

He'd known how his end would feel. That dream had shown him. He'd seen this day coming. But it'd always been *coming*. Some day. Eventually. He never thought it'd arrive so suddenly. No more was he the unflappable, unfeeling merchant. He panicked. Emotions gripped him. Anxiety, fear, and dismay wrapped their shapeless tendrils around his heart.

Pride had kept him firm in his resolve to uphold the validity of the life he'd lived. But pride was powerless before the eternal nothingness of death. It ripped away his facade, leaving only regret. Undeniable, inescapable regret.

He heard his own voice echoing.

I see. So I failed, then I failed to acknowledge my failure. And when presented with chances to make things right, I failed again and again, letting them slip away from me.

He'd lived a life of obstinacy, failing by his own choice until the bitter end. Despair began to eat away at his soul. He now knew that the dream had come true. Just like it foretold, he'd never wake again. As the last vestiges of strength faded from him, he felt himself sink. The thick swampy gloom below engulfed him.

And that was when he saw it—a strange thread, white and thin. It dangled down, somehow parting the surrounding darkness as it extended toward him. The thread seemed so frail, it might come apart at the slightest tug. He reached for it nonetheless, not knowing why he did or what he

hoped to accomplish. Like a drowning man grasping at a straw, he desperately stretched his arm, his hand, and even the tips of his fingers toward it...

Then, he woke up.

"Mmm... Where..."

All was white. A voice sounded in his ear.

"Master Shalloak, you're awake."

He turned his head toward it. As his sight returned, a young girl appeared in view. He recognized her.

"You... You were with Princess Mia..."

"My name is Tatiana. I'm currently studying at Saint-Noel Academy thanks to the scholarship program you created."

"Whuh? Wait, that's—"

An odd voice seemed to follow Tatiana's, but his foggy mind, already struggling to process her statement, lacked the capacity to ponder it further.

"Scholarship? Ah..."

An old memory resurfaced of when he'd still been a fresh sprout of a merchant. He had indeed created something of the sort after he'd successfully wrapped up his first big job. Back then, he'd still been naive enough to say that he wanted to use his profits for the good of others and society.

So foolish. So clueless. I knew neither the harshness of the world nor the cruelty of human nature. It was the ignorant deed of an ignorant man.

Scholarship program? He'd scoff if he had the strength to. Not a single gold coin came of that pointless endeavor.

Nothing but silly sentimentality. It's all worthless...

He paused and considered the thought again. A sardonic smile crept across his lips.

"Which, I suppose, perfectly sums up my life as well."

Having peered into the essence of his life and finding it devoid of meaning or value, he'd lost his way. He no longer knew what was right.

"I see that you've returned to us."

Hearing another voice, he looked in its direction.

"It gives me much relief to know that you're safe, if not entirely sound."

The princess of Tearmoon stood before him.

"...Your Highness? What brings you here? I don't assume you're here

just to wish me a fast recovery."

Mia did not respond immediately. She traded a quick glance with Tatiana, as though seeking confirmation, only to shake her head. Then, she showed him a sly, toothy smile.

"As a matter of fact, no. I came here to finish you off."

"Oho, how menacing. What will it be then? Poison, perhaps?"

Shalloak tried to sit up in his bed, but Mia held up a hand to stop him.

"Easy there, don't hurt your— Uh, I mean, it's going to be a problem if you pass out again. I'd appreciate it if you just kept lying down."

Had this been the former Shalloak, he'd surely have risen anyway. To him, a basic principle of negotiating successfully was assuming the correct posture. Was it more effective to stand tall and look down his nose, or remain seated and project arrogance? It depended on the situation. Sometimes, bending at the knees or even prostrating himself could be the right choice. Regardless, it was a choice he made based on his judgment. This time, however, he simply obeyed Mia's instruction. His close shave with death had removed from him all desire and reason to put on fronts.

"Yes, yes, just like that. It's so nice when people just listen. To answer your question though, no, it will not be poison. In fact, I don't have to do anything at all." Mia smiled calmly at him. "We all must reap what we sow. That which will finish you off is none other than the seeds you'd sown yourself."

Shalloak blinked once at the claim. Then, he grimaced in understanding.

"Ah... Well said. I couldn't agree more."

Reflecting on the source of his despair, he found that there was nothing but truth to her words. That which would finish him off was certainly not poison.

"In a way, it could even be said that you've already met your end," she continued.

If *that* was death, that absoluteness of despair, and being consumed by it was simply a matter of time...then maybe he had indeed already met his end. He already knew the "how" of his death. What difference did the "when" make? Her biting remark pierced his chest and shook his soul.

"What I'm saying is that you shouldn't go around sowing seeds you can't handle, but I guess my advice is too little too late, isn't it? Your end is your own making, Shalloak."

“It does seem to be, doesn’t it...?”

He slowly shook his head.

Where did I go wrong...?

He must have, if the last stop in his life’s journey was that dark abyss of despair...

Perhaps a death without hope or salvation was the last stop in everyone’s journey. Perhaps, in the end...the void came for them all. But in that moment, he found the thought a hard pill to swallow, because the girl before her, having climbed to the heights of the Great Sage of the Empire, did not seem to conform. He simply couldn’t imagine her meeting the same empty end.

Sowing seeds I can’t handle, huh... So there are people who can find peace in that abyss of despair, then? I suppose there are, but I lack the strength to be among their ranks. But what am I to do with this realization? What was I ever supposed to do?

Mia watched as he fell into a rare moment of somber pensiveness. For some reason, there was pity in her gaze.

Chapter 29: Encouragement from Mushroom Empress Mia

In truth, Mia was no longer in any mood to attack Shalloak.

Yes, she'd come here with the intention of pressuring him until he snapped. In fact, on the way here, she'd considered all sorts of mean things to do to him, only for her motivation to fizzle out at the sight of him weak and weary in bed. He was a morally bankrupt merchant...and her enemy. But even then, she just didn't have it in her to kick someone when they were down. Also...she suddenly saw herself in Shalloak. Wasn't the sight of this man, who lay there as a result of his immoderation and gluttony, a glimpse into her own future if she kept engaging in the same kind of overindulgence?

No... Surely, I won't end up in this bad of a condition.

Not entirely convinced by her own rebuttal, she couldn't resist palpating her tummy, just to be sure. To her relief, she seemed to have a long way to go before matching his girth.

Either way, she had—possibly literally—a gut feeling that laying into this man would be a mistake. It just didn't feel right.

I almost pity him, in a way. All he did was eat a lot of delicious food and laze around a lot. What's wrong with that? And this is what he gets in return? If this is how the world works, then the world is the one that's wrong!

Feeling outraged on his behalf, she began to sympathize and resonate with Shalloak's plight of F.A.T.! So, she made up her mind. She'd wait until he woke up. Then, after making sure he was okay, she'd leave him in peace.

Her plan was going well until, to her shock, Tatiana suddenly decided to start exposing his shameful past.

Wait, what in the moons are you doing, Tatiana?! Are you sure about this?

The question got within an inch of her throat before a realization forced

it back down.

You're...trying to minimize the damage on all sides, aren't you?

Viewed in that light, what Tatiana was doing made sense. Sometimes, it was necessary to kick every last bit of fight out of a downed opponent. Letting them get up again would only cause the fight to drag on, leading to more injuries. This applied to Shalloak. He was receptive to her right now, but if he were allowed to recover, he'd go back to his old recalcitrant self. Therefore, they should take advantage of his current vulnerability and thrash him so badly that he'd quit his nasty ways for good.

Forcing him to stop scheming and get some quiet rest is ultimately for his good... That's what you're thinking, isn't it, Tatiana?

Having figured that much, Mia straightened. She'd originally brought Tatiana along as a convenience, but the girl had certainly earned her spot. Seeing her so determined to repay the man who'd changed her life, Mia decided that she owed her at least some help.

So be it. I'll play the part of the villain for you, then!

Envisioning the villainess that had shown up in one of Elise's stories, she curled her lips into a wicked crescent.

"What I'm saying...is that you shouldn't go around sowing seeds you can't handle, but I guess my advice is too little too late, isn't it? Your end is your own making, Shalloak."

After all that pretentious posturing, all that bluff and bluster, he turned out to have all the cold, calculating ruthlessness of a doting uncle. The shame! It was too much! Nevertheless, Mia hardened her heart and prepared to break the will of the man in whom she saw herself. It was kicking time!

This is for your own good, Shalloak! We're going to keep you healthy enough to live out the rest of your life as nothing more than a nice person!

She gritted her teeth, hoping that was excuse enough to convince herself. That was when Shalloak's eyes opened slightly.

"Your Highness... May I...ask you a question?"

"...Oh? What is it?"

"Please, tell me..." He struggled up to a sitting position. "If you ever found yourself at the end of a path that had been wrong for a very long time...and you had no choice but to admit it was wrong... What would you do?"

Mia frowned in puzzlement, caught off guard by the question.

What a strange and abrupt question. I wonder if he's trying to dodge the issue by changing the topic? Hmph, you're not getting away. I'm going to beat all the fight out of you, right here and right now. There'll be nothing left in you but a sentimental old sop!

She huffed a breath out through her nose and replied, "What would I do? Simple. I'd double back to before I made my first wrong turn and look for the correct path forward. What else *is* there to do?"

Mia, you see, knew what to do if she were to ever lose her sense of direction in a forest while hunting for mushrooms. The correct course of action was simple: retrace her steps back to the place where she started to reorient herself. She learned this from a book she'd been reading obsessively lately. Titled *Hundred Mushroom Delicacies*, it was written by an adventurer who detailed fine foods.

Fundamentally, if you realize you're lost, then the last thing you should be doing is philosophizing about how wrong the path was. Yes, you've come a long way, but you can't let sunk costs cloud your judgment. The more you wander around aimlessly, the more lost you'll be, and the more stamina you'll waste. The only solution is to double back all the way.

Mia, who understood this mushroom-picking truth, felt that the concept could be applied to life in general. She had in the past sought to research mushroom recipes, only to abandon the pursuit in the face of opposition from those around her. The door to her unending quest to perfect sautéed horse-shaped mushrooms and mushroom sweets had been shut before she'd even touched it.

But now, she felt that she'd made a terrible mistake.

When all is said and done...I still love mushrooms!

Reading *Hundred Mushroom Delicacies* had hardened her resolve on the matter.

One way or another, I'm going to treat Abel and the other student council members to the ultimate full course mushroom meal! And I'm going to personally cook it!

Holding high a mushroom of imperial purple—figuratively, of course—she proudly declared—mentally, of course—her ambition to the world. The lack of any outwardly visible phenomena notwithstanding, it was undoubtedly the historic moment when Mushroom Princess Mia took her

first step on the path toward becoming Mushroom Empress.

All right, back to the serious stuff now.

“Before you made your first wrong turn... I see. What a tantalizing thought. If only such an option were available to me...” murmured Shalloak.

Seeing that her opponent wasn’t striking back, Mia stayed on the offensive.

You think you can fudge the issue by mumbling weird things to yourself? Well, you’d better think again! I’ve answered your question, so now it’s my turn. And I’m going to drag this conversation right back to where we started and finish you off!

She folded her arms victoriously and smiled smugly at him.

“It’s time you accepted the cold, harsh truth, Shalloak, that she is your undoing. Tatiana is a seed you sowed yourself, and her existence represents an inextricable part of your person.”

She emphasized the point to ensure Shalloak didn’t try to dismiss it as mere youthful indiscretion. No, what he did for Tatiana had to be a part of his fundamental character.

“Huh?” blurted Tatiana, blinking in surprise.

“The person who saved your life...is none other than her!”

“Wh-What? No, that’s...” Tatiana shook her hands and head in a panic. “I didn’t save anyone’s life. Also, this isn’t something that can be cured so easily. Oh, but...”

Tatiana caught herself. For a brief moment, she studied Shalloak, then said, “Eating lots of sweet or fatty foods and not exercising... These are things that will erode your health. Obesity increases the physiological burden of the heart, making it easier to collapse. It’s possible for your condition to deteriorate even further. Therefore, I really think you should pay more attention to your diet.”

She finished her counsel to a speechless Shalloak. A second later, Mia chimed in.

“Just so you know, Tatiana is being modest. The truth is that when you collapsed, she was the first to run over and help you. Even as you fell on her, she cradled your head so you wouldn’t hit it on the ground. The way I see it, she saved your life, and that’s that.”

Tatiana glossing over the details weakened her offensive potential, and that just wouldn’t do. Mia made sure to state in explicit and graphic terms

how Shalloak owed his life to the girl. That set the stage for her next attack.

"Let me tell you a small story. Tatiana's father, you see, was a doctor, but he passed away when she was young. In honor of her dear father, she aspired to practice medicine. However, she had no money, so she had no choice but to give up on this dream. Oh, the tragedy! Doesn't it just wrench your heart?" Mia hammed up her delivery a little for effect, gesturing melodramatically as she spoke. "But wait! There was something that showed up in the nick of time and saved her from her plight. This something...was a scholarship program. *Your* scholarship program, Shalloak! The one that didn't make you even a penny of profit!"

The man who'd put on such a tough act, claiming he only ever did things for money and would use even others' misfortune for his own profit...ended up being saved by a naive act of altruism he'd done in the past.

The tougher the act, the more this kind of thing hurts, and he has been putting on a pretty *tough act. Honestly, if I were him, I'd die from pure embarrassment.*

She placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Look, haven't you kept it up for long enough? Just let it go already. You tell everyone that you only care about money. That money is everything, and money is your god. But in the end, what saved you was the result of *wasting* money. Isn't it time you admitted that there's more to the world than money?" What seemed like pure compassion radiated from her smile. "All this scheming, this conniving and calculating... It's senseless. Doubly so when it's shaving away your life. Stop and rest. If you need help, Tatiana will be happy to offer it. Listen to her advice and retrieve your health. Am I understood?"

With that, she heard the snap of Shalloak's faltering will. At the same time, she opened the way for Tatiana to pay him back for changing her life. With the face of someone who'd just done a damn fine job and knew it, she silently offered one last message of encouragement.

Do get better, Shalloak. Let's both take care of ourselves and live long, healthy lives.

It was a message she delivered with sincerity to a predecessor who walked the brambled path of F.A.T. before her.

“Ah... Aaah... I see.” Shalloak’s voice trembled. He was indeed wrong. His whole life had been wrong. However...not all of it had been a waste.

Once upon a future, there was a man known as the Merchant King. His stubborn pursuit of money led him to dismiss many things as worthless, including the voices of the weak and needy, as well as the repentant. Those voices, formerly rebuffed, had at last made it into Shalloak’s ears.

“Hah, that’s it? I had no idea that it’s so utterly simple...”

If he lost his way, all he had to do was go back to before he got lost. Instead, he’d hidden his self-loathing within the veneer of self-reflection, and over time, grown weary of even the veneer. He chose to accept himself as is, but deep down, he was simply giving up. Eventually, the very fact that he was lost began to fade from his consciousness. Occasionally, he’d have a moment of clarity and realize he was utterly lost in the depths of an unfamiliar forest. Every time, though, he’d let out a sardonic laugh and keep advancing, figuring it was too late to turn back.

Mia, however, didn’t think so. She met him in the woods, knowing full well how far he’d strayed from the path, and nonchalantly told him to go back. It was wrong to believe that money was everything, so before he fully succumbed to its curse, he should just backtrack until he could pick the correct path.

He recalled an old memory of leaving his master’s side to start his own merchanting career. Then, a flurry of scenes followed. Bright-eyed children played with strange toys from distant lands. Young women marveled at quilts with beautiful, exotic patterns. Curious husbands gleefully trying smoking pipes from foreign cultures. The goods he carried brought people joy, and whenever he saw their smiles, he felt a faint sense of pride.

Then, when he successfully finished his first big job, he was so overcome with joy that he felt a desire to do something good for the world. The desire led to him setting up a scholarship program, which earned him no small amount of ridicule from his fellow merchants.

I was so naive...but also so sincere. I sincerely loved my job, and I was proud to do it.

When had it all changed? When did the source of his joy change from the work itself to the money it brought in? And his pride, not from his job but his wealth? It probably occurred not in a moment but over a span. Gradually, the pressures of merchanting redirected his attention from

pleasing customers to increasing profit. The principle of minimizing costs and maximizing returns—a basic axiom of business—spilled over to all other aspects of his life. If he was minimizing costs, could he minimize his effort as well? And if returns were to be maximized, what about joy? Before he knew it, he'd tethered his enjoyment not to the work he did, but the money it made him.

"Master Shalloak..."

He looked up to find the girl named Tatiana gazing straight at him.

"Don't be discouraged. It's not too late; you can still get better. I'll help you, so let's try our best together."

She likely meant that his physical health could still get better, but to Shalloak, it resonated on a much deeper level, as if she was asking him not to give up on himself, that it wasn't too late to turn back and find a new way to live...

"Not too late, huh...? I can still..."

With eyes shut, he slowly inhaled, feeling the air fill his lungs. It was, he felt, perhaps the first breath he'd truly drawn in a very long time. He let it out, and an invisible weight left with it. His eyes reopened to a world more vivid than he remembered.

Chapter 30: A Perujin Night

That night, after Mia's welcome banquet concluded, King Yuhal and his wife retired to their chamber.

"The collapse of that poor merchant earlier muddled the discussion, didn't it?" said the worried queen. "Will everything be all right?"

Yuhal sighed and gave her a reassuring nod. "I think it will be. In fact, I believe Princess Mia intentionally left matters undecided to give us time to think..."

Shalloak's collapse was certainly a significant disruption, but there was no need for her to follow him. After the initial commotion died down, she could easily have resumed their talk and pressed him for an answer. Instead, she had left the banquet.

"I suppose she has absolute confidence in her proposal..."

"No, father, I don't think so."

Hearing an unexpected voice, Yuhal turned to find both his daughters at the door.

"Arshia... Rania..."

"Please excuse our sudden entrance."

Yuhal, though caught off guard, did not find their appearance entirely surprising. He'd had a feeling the night wouldn't end without a visit from them.

"May we have a moment of your time, father?"

"Yes, you may. You have perhaps come at the perfect time. I've also been meaning to speak with the two of you." He bade his daughters in, then lowered his head toward them. "...I'm sorry for keeping the treaty with Tearmoon a secret from you."

The treaty between the two nations had existed since Perujin's inception. Agricultural Country Perujin was founded in response to the establishment of the Tearmoon Empire upon the Fertile Crescent. The tribe of hunters that had occupied the land became its new masters, and the farmers whose homes and fields had been invaded saw themselves relegated to serfs. Those

who wished to escape the empire's dominance fled south to settle in freer lands, where they founded the country of Perujin.

Believing that left unchecked, Tearmoon would inevitably act to swallow their country, Perujin's founders sought to preemptively deter the empire by negotiating a deal. They requested recognition of their sovereignty in return for Tearmoon gaining exclusive rights to a portion of their wheat, which would be reserved annually. The first Tearmoon emperor agreed to their terms, and the treaty was made.

Yuhal did not understand what the emperor had sought to gain from this agreement. He certainly could have refused, opting instead for immediate annexation and serf labor. Regardless, the deal was made, and Perujin's independence was guaranteed, though at the cost of subordinating itself to Tearmoon. The founders had, in essence, sacrificed an aspect of their sovereignty to maintain the rest. Ever since then, Perujin had been dependent on Tearmoon, allowing the latter to continuously squeeze cheap wheat out of them, but never so much as to leave them dry. It was sustained exploitation, but performed with the agreement of both parties.

This dynamic had always been a closely held secret, known only by the royal family and a limited number of confidants. If the people's resentment toward the empire were to ever reach the point of triggering conflict, it would spell the end of Perujin. The imperial army would march in; the invasion would be short and decisive. In the end, Tearmoon would have expanded its borders, and Perujin would become a mark of a past time.

Those who had memories—be they remembered or retold—of being driven out of the Fertile Crescent felt this fear especially vividly. Give the empire a single excuse to invade, and the citizens would all wake up serfs the next morning. Operating under this belief, they trod extremely carefully, doing what they could to get things done without ever angering the empire.

Past Perujin kings, in an effort to lift their country from poverty, set their sights not on renegotiating the treaty with Tearmoon but improving their own agricultural prowess. In pursuing this goal, the existence of this founding treaty was made a secret. Every year, negotiations with the empire were attended by only a few members of the royal family and a select handful of delegates, and the price they ultimately settled on was never released to the public. The vast majority of people—the two princesses included—were kept in the dark. Yuhal had always avoided all mention of

the treaty, instead telling them that the empire was a long-standing and highly valued client whose business was extremely important to their agricultural industry.

The description wasn't wrong, per se. Business between the two nations included more than just wheat. Every year, Tearmoon purchased vast amounts of agricultural products from Perujin, and those whose prices were unfettered by the treaty brought in sizable profits. Given this dynamic, public sentiment toward Tearmoon was...*complicated*, to say the least.

"Since your marriages will eventually send the two of you abroad, I wasn't planning to burden you with this knowledge, but—"

Arshia stopped him with a shake of her head. "What's done is done, so let's leave it be. For now, I have nothing to say about this topic. What I *do* want to know is what you plan to do about the proposal."

"A fine question...and one to which I myself would like to know the answer."

If the treaty with the empire were abolished, large swathes of their land could be repurposed to grow more profitable crops—that much was true. They could also continue growing wheat there but sell it to other nations. Either way, a significant pivot in national strategy would be required.

"In exchange for freeing ourselves from our wheat obligation, we lose our ability to rely entirely on the imperial army for our defense. Our profits will likely rise, but some will need to be diverted to military expenses to protect our newfound wealth."

They couldn't possibly match the empire's military prowess, but they'd need to at least rival neighboring nations. It was logical—even natural—to assume so. But...

"Is there something you'd like to say? Go ahead; tell me what you think," said Yuhal, noticing a hint of dissension in Rania's expression.

Only after he asked for her opinion did it hit him: he'd asked his daughter for her opinion. Never before had he even considered the thought.

So even I've been influenced by Princess Mia...

It shook him. At the same time, it intrigued him. The Great Sage of the Empire had, over a single dinner, left him debating the very future of his country. What, then, might his daughters, who'd spent so much time with her, have to say about the matter? Might they surprise him with an unexpected answer as well? He had to know.

Rania hesitated, unused to the sudden interest her father displayed in her opinion. She shook her head to gather herself and said, “In my opinion, that kind of thinking goes against the philosophy of our ancestors who built this ‘cake-shaped castle.’”

What she spoke of was a fairy tale that only children could indulge. It evoked visions of a world without war filled with castles not built for battle—a fantasy that forever lay far beyond the horizon of tomorrow. For all its absurdity, however, her voice was steady and sober. And Yuhal knew why.

It was the Great Sage of the Empire. Rania had spoken so earnestly about a fantastical future because she couldn’t help but think that maybe...*maybe*, with Princess Mia at the helm, it could become a reality.

It was absurd. Or was it? What if she was right, and such a world was truly within the realm of possibility? What, then, would be the correct path forward for the people of Perujin?

“We are a people of the land,” said Rania. “We till it, farm it, and bring the gift of its fruit to others. This is how we view ourselves. It’s our identity and pride. Isn’t it important not to let go of that?”

There was a dignity to her words. A confidence that went beyond simple pride. It was an unshakable sense of self-worth rooted in the Perujin people, their generations of toil, and the indisputable value of their accomplishments.

Yuhal blinked. He couldn’t help but feel there was a faint light radiating from Rania. In a way, there was. Walking up that golden slope alongside the Great Sage of the Empire had imbued Rania with a piece of her brilliance. Now, even in the absence of Mia, it continued to emit an enduring afterglow.

For a long moment, Yuhal stared at her with widened eyes. Then, a hint of a smile touched his lips.

My daughters are all grown up...

He retreated into his thoughts. Both Rania and Arshia were exceptionally fulfilling their duties as princesses of Perujin. His daughters were pulling *their* weight. What about him?

“Father, do you know what Princess Mia said during Saint-Noel Academy’s entrance ceremony?” asked Rania.

Yuhal looked at her. He knew what she was talking about—the Bread-Cake Declaration.

“I do. She spoke of nations helping each other during times of famine. Frankly, if it came from anyone else, I’d worry about their grip on reality,” he answered.

“I see Princess Mia as a rule-breaker in every sense of the word,” said Arshia, following up on Rania’s topic. “It’s as if we all think within the bounds of a box, but she’s outside it. She cares about people. Not just her own, but all the continent’s people, and all equally. When she first asked me to be a lecturer at her academy, I was going to say no. The reason I agreed was because I realized that my dream was never to keep the people of Perujin from starving. It would never be enough...”

Arshia looked him in the eye, and his breath caught in this throat. He felt as if he were seeing her anew. Gone was the callow daughter who struggled to hide her rebellious urges. The person before him now was a researcher whose shoulders, though young, confidently bore the weight of her grand mission.

“I still remember the day when Princess Mia became a beacon for me,” Arshia continued. “And when I heard about her Bread-Cake Declaration, I felt her radiance again. Her guiding light showed me what my dream truly should be.”

“The Bread-Cake Declaration... The need for cold-resistant wheat, as well as an advocate to get the word out... The emancipation of Perujin as a country...” Yuhal murmured pensively. “A new way forward, huh... I think I finally understand what Princess Mia is asking from us...and what the two of you are trying to say.”

Then, he laughed. It was not his usual laugh, for it had none of the strain and servility he’d become accustomed to. This one came from deep down, filled with innocent, childlike joy.

“Interesting. Very interesting.” It seemed a tad backwards to throw in with Mia when he could have freed his country from Tearmoon’s influence. But... “No, that’s not it... We *will* be free—truly free. Both from burdens of the present and baggage of the past. Either way, we must break the status quo. To that end, casting our lot in with Princess Mia should be...interesting, to say the least.”

His heart quickened with an emotion that had been absent for a long time—excitement. Expectation and anticipation soon followed. He felt like a child planning a prank.

“Well then. In that case, there’s something I must ask Princess Mia to do for me in return...”

His daughters traded bewildered glances, unsure what their father had in mind.

Chapter 31: The People Mia Dragged into Her Plans

“So this is what Agricultural Country Perujin looks like...”

Chloe Forkroad gazed out the window of her carriage as it rolled past a vast expanse of farmland.

“I can’t believe it. It’s endless. Nothing but fields upon fields.”

“‘Not an acre of our land left untilled’ is their national motto, after all,” added Marco.

“The fields are so big, and there are so *many* of them. I’ve never seen anything like this...”

Throughout her childhood, Chloe had followed her father on business trips that took them to numerous nations. Perujin, however, was a first for her.

Marco had always considered Perujin a rather boring country to visit. Personally, he found their agricultural technology fascinating and could spend hours just watching them work, but assuming a child would soon lose interest, he’d never brought Chloe with him. This trip, however, was Chloe’s idea, and she’d insisted on coming with him. Considering he’d recently collapsed from overwork, she probably wanted to make sure he wouldn’t push himself too hard again.

“I wasn’t planning on working myself back into a hospital bed, but she wouldn’t take no for an answer,” he murmured to himself.

He was coming to attend the Thanksharvest Festival, which meant most of his time would be spent meeting and greeting people. If he came across some good crops, he’d certainly pick up a few crates, but overall, he was going to take it easy. It was more of a vacation than a work trip. Nevertheless, he readily agreed to having her accompany him.

Was it because he didn’t want to discourage his daughter when she was looking out for his health? As a matter of fact, it wasn’t. He’d brought her along because he sensed that change was afoot. He felt it in the air, like a

rumbling that signaled the approach of a massive current. If Chloe was going to be dragged into this current and involve herself with Princess Mia's grand vision of a new world order for the distribution of food, then committing supply routes to memory could only help her down the road.

Besides, networking is crucial for business, and if I plan to hand over Forkroad & Co. to her someday, I need her to start building her own connections. Fortunately, King Yuhal of Perujin is a mild-mannered man. He doesn't look down on commoners, so I can probably get an audience with him. It'll be a good opportunity to introduce him to Chloe—

"I can't wait to see Princess Rania dance... I wonder if she's practicing? Hee hee..."

"...Hm?"

Marco did a double take. Chloe had said the princess's name so casually, he almost took it for the name of a friend.

"What was that?"

"I said I can't wait to see Princess Rania's performance. I met her at Saint-Noel, and we're pretty good friends now. She's going to do the Thanksharvest Dance during the festival, and I promised I'd go watch."

Chloe giggled.

Marco simply stared, trying to wrap his head around the fact that his daughter was not only friends with the third princess of Perujin but close enough to be making private promises to see each other. Then again, maybe he shouldn't be so surprised. From Mia and Rafina to the princes in the student council, Chloe mingled with aristocratic heavyweights on a regular basis. Her friend circle was filled with people he'd have great difficulty catching a glimpse of, never mind talking to. In that sense, the fact that Chloe was friends with a Perujin princess was perhaps not worthy of comment. What astonished Marco, however, was the sheer *breadth* of her connections. She had probably gotten to know all these people through Mia, but Chloe didn't allow them to remain second-degree acquaintances—she took it a step further and established proper friendships with them. Her promise to come watch the dance was proof.

Marco found himself surprised by her initiative. Chloe had always been a shy, introverted girl. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd asked her to greet someone, only to have her hide behind his back. The first couple of times she'd come home from Saint-Noel, he felt like she was still

the same person. But now...

I see. You've changed, haven't you? You've...grown up.

Behind his daughter's metamorphosis was likely the influence of the Great Sage of the Empire.

I get the feeling that Princess Mia is pulling Chloe along with her, and she's going to take my daughter to places beyond my wildest imaginations...

Children are to parents as fledglings are to nests—they leave to fly even higher. Marco knew this. Knowledge, however, was no shield. A creeping loneliness still gnawed at his heart.

"Father? What's the matter? Oh no, are you feeling sick again?"

Roused from his thoughts, he looked up to find Chloe's worried face.

"No, no, I'm fine. Don't worry about it."

He was hardly going to admit that seeing how much his daughter had grown was making him feel a little lonely. Unfortunately, his evasive response only deepened her concern.

"Listen, father. I know you'll want to talk business, but please keep it to a minimum, okay? If necessary, I can step in..."

She spoke with the natural authority that came with maturity and competence. Already feeling sentimental, he was extra vulnerable to this emotional roundhouse. It took an effort of will not to tear up.

"F-Father?"

"Ah, don't mind me. It's nothing. You're, uh, right, though... I can't exactly sit them out completely, but letting you get some hands-on experience with business talks is probably worthwhile..." he said, nodding thoughtfully to himself.

After a while, he smiled.

"Is school fun, Chloe?"

"Huh? Well...yes. The days I spend there are very fulfilling."

"So I see..."

As he regarded the heartfelt joy that appeared on her face at the mention of her school, he finally decided to throw in the proverbial towel.

I think it's time I started thinking seriously about retirement...

Unbeknownst to Marco, he would end up having to pick the proverbial towel back up, for he'd made one crucial mistake. He thought himself a spectator, but the current he felt was far larger than he knew. It would swallow up everyone near Mia, him included, dragging all of them into her

plans.

The seeds Mia had sown throughout the lands had sprouted...and one was about to bear fruit.

Dawn was breaking over Perujin's night.

Part 3: A New Oath Between the Moon and Stars III Fin
To Be Continued in Part 4: To the Moon-Led Morrow II

The Promised Castilla

During the final years of the Tearmoon Empire, a continent-wide famine coupled with rampant disease and the senseless bloodshed of a civil war left the imperial capital of Lunatear in an absolutely wretched state. The very air smelled of spite and suspicion. Hunched forms walked with bated breath down crumbling roads, shooting wary, menacing glares at one another. Minor disputes often triggered violent altercations. No one ever stepped in to break them up. Neither did anyone ever cheer. Apathy ruled the hearts of the people, and irrational contempt for others filled their minds. Everywhere, there was nothing but cold antipathy. Everywhere except...a single cell in the underground dungeon where the atmosphere, in stark contrast to the rest of the city, was invitingly genial.

"It's still ice candies for me," said Anne Littstein, smiling fondly as she cupped her cheeks in her hands. "I've only ever tried them once, but they were *so* good. Grilled meat and soup and stuff are all pretty good, but nothing beats sweet things."

The denizen of the dungeon cell, Mia Luna Tearmoon, let out a gentle laugh.

"Oh, we're such kindred souls, aren't we, Anne? I love sweets too."

"What kind of sweets are your favorite, milady?"

"Hmm, it has to be cakes. Especially ones with lots of cream and strawberries on top."

Just then, a thought occurred to Mia, prompting her to clap her hands together.

"Oh, I just remembered! There's this thing called a castilla that I really like too. It's a traditional Perujin specialty, and it's very sweet. When you take a bite, it sort of crumbles and melts in your mouth, and it's absolutely delicious."

Mia echoed Anne's hands-to-cheeks gesture, grinning at the memory.

"Really? I've never heard of it. Is it really that good?"

"Oh, trust me. Castillas are exquisite! They're a favorite of father's too.

Once I get out of here, we should have some together. I'll introduce you to father too, and everyone can say hi. In fact, we should make it a promise."

"Huh? B-But...I don't really want to meet—"

"It's a promise! Because I said so! I'm going to have you meet him, and that's that. I need to thank you properly, or it's going to keep bothering me all the time."

Flustered by Mia's pushiness, Anne could do little but acquiesce to her demand.

This event was still early in Mia's dungeon life, taking place not long after she was captured.

Time passed. Mia's father, Matthias Luna Tearmoon, was brought to the guillotine, bringing a swift and brutal end to the emperor's reign. Anne's visit to Mia came three days later.

"Oh... Anne..."

She entered the cell to find an expressionless Mia. After a few seconds, however, emotion returned to her face.

"I'm sorry, Anne. My promise to introduce you to father... It doesn't look like I'll be able to fulfill it anymore."

Mia smiled. It was such a sad smile.

"Milady..."

Anne's throat tightened. She felt she should say something. *Needed* to. But nothing came. What *could* she say? Should she give her condolences? Offer sympathy? Or downplay the matter by pointing to the numbing prevalence of death in the world right now? After all, Anne's sister Elise had passed away too. Few who lived in this empire were spared the pain of losing family. But was that reason not to grieve? To deny Mia even the comfort of commiseration?

Such callous voices were not at all uncommon, but Anne disagreed. Mia had been hurt enough. She was still hurting. To Anne, that fact alone was reason enough for her to offer compassion and condolence. So, she said, "We *will* eat those castillas, milady. Don't you worry."

Mia blinked a few times, baffled by this sudden change in topic.

"The castillas! You promised that we'll eat them together, remember?" said Anne.

"...Oh, Anne. Don't be silly. That's clearly not going to happen. I have

no way of getting out of here, and even if I did, how are we going to find any with the empire in this state?"

"Then I'll make them myself. I'll learn the recipe and bring them here."

"Anne, please. You're being unreasonable. Besides, what you're proposing is entirely backwards. The point was for me to treat you as a way of showing my thanks."

"Then... You can help me practice. I want to make castillas for my little siblings, but I need someone to taste test my first couple of attempts. You'll be doing it for me. How's that?"

Anne leaned toward her, fists balled in determination.

"Come on, that's so..." Mia trailed off. A poignant silence passed between the two. Then, she said, "Well, if you put it that way, I suppose I can do you a special favor. It's a promise. Just for you, Anne, I'll try your castillas."

"Thank you. Make sure you wait for me to bring them, milady. It's a promise," said Anne, voice infused with purpose.

From then on, Anne did everything she could to figure out how to bake a castilla. The process was by no means easy. Just finding the recipe was hard enough, but the sugar and flour it required was far beyond the ability of a common townsperson like her to acquire. When bread was scarce, cake was beyond luxury.

She never did manage to bake a castilla.

Mia for her part, never brought up the issue. Perhaps she'd forgotten. It was, after all, a pretty absurd promise. The fact that she'd been half-finagled into making it was awkward enough, never mind its impromptu verbal nature. Maybe she never actually expected Anne to make good on it in the first place.

All Anne knew was that the last words Mia had said to her were "thank you." Simple but heartfelt words of gratitude. It left Anne wondering whether she'd earned those words. Had she truly done enough for her mistress to deserve that final gesture of appreciation? The question hovered in her mind for a second, then flitted away.

Anne Littstein, the woman who remained by Mia's side throughout the Tearmoon revolution until the last moments of her life...had but one regret —a promise she couldn't keep. It was a simple promise. Trivial, really. But

it remained in her mind as a rueful memory, sinking ever deeper into the core of her soul.

And so spun the wheel of time...

"Mmm... Hm?"

Morning sunlight shone through her eyelids, rousing Anne from slumber.

"Hnnnnngh..."

She pushed her arms out as far as they would go, stretching her sleep-stiffened muscles. As she opened her eyes, she suddenly realized something wasn't quite right.

"Why's everything so blurry...?"

Struggling to parse this strange phenomenon, she wiped a finger across her eye. It came back wet. Shocked, she stared at her moistened finger as tears continued to well. A soft pang of heartache caused her chest to tighten. She felt like she had just woken from a very sorrowful dream.

"Oooh, no... No more... Can't eat..."

A nearby voice caught her attention. She turned to find a blissfully sleeping Mia, lips curled into a grin with a faint line of drool down one corner.

"Milady..."

For some reason, the sight of Mia's face filled her with relief. That relief then turned into confusion. Why did she feel this way? She hadn't the faintest clue. Nothing had been different than usual when she'd gone to bed last night. They'd fallen asleep beside each other, so it was only natural for her to wake up to Mia's face. So why did that carefree expression make her want to cry? And cry with happiness, at that?

"Mmmm... Mm?"

Mia's mumbling suggested she'd woken up as well. Following a similar bout of stretching, she sat up.

"Oh, Anne. You're awake." She yawned. "Good morning."

She rubbed her eyes, blinked a few times, then yawned again. Only then did she glance at Anne and all but freeze.

"A-Anne? What in the moons? You're...crying? What's the matter? D-Did something bad happen?"

Mia's sudden panic prompted Anne to snap out of her reverie, at which point she realized that there were indeed streams of tears on her cheeks.

"Oh, no, it's nothing. I'm fine."

"B-But *look* at you! You almost never cry like this. How can it possibly be nothing? Tell me truthfully, Anne. What's going on? Did somebody give you a hard time? Oh, I bet it's the stupid four— I mean Ludwig. He said something mean to you, didn't he?! If he did, then I'm going to go teach him a lesson with my foot! Hmph!"

Mia threw out a few practice kicks at an imaginary target, eager to unleash her special technique on a deserving rump. Anne, however, shook her head.

"No, it's fine. I mean it. Nothing happened."

"But..."

Anne grimaced at the look of deep concern on Mia's face. Clearly, she'd made her mistress *very* worried.

"I just had a bad dream. A very sad one, to be specific."

"A dream? Hm... Maybe it's because you've been away from your family for such a long time... I'm sorry. You must miss them a lot..." mumbled Mia before an idea made her strike her palm.

"Oh, I know what we can do. We're already in Perujin, so this is perfect timing..." A grin spread across her lips. "Anne, why don't you take the day off? Consider it a bit of compensation for all the time you've spent away from home. It's not nearly enough to make up for your dedication, but it's a start."

"Huh? You mean...you don't want me to be around you today?"

"Uh, it's not that I don't want you around. It's just that, um... I have to engage in some private discussions with His Majesty, so you might as well get some rest in the meantime."

Frankly, Anne would much rather stay beside Mia today, especially after the disturbing experience she'd woken up to, so she couldn't help but feel a tad disappointed.

"It'll be all right," Mia continued. "I'll be fine on my own. You know I can handle myself. Just relax and enjoy some peace and quiet."

Anne, having been given an appreciative smile, along with a handy sum of gold and advice to "go get yourself something tasty with this," had no choice but to respectfully comply.

“Okay, understood. I’ll relax.”

She smiled back at Mia, whose expression never quite lost that tinge of concern.

After bidding goodbye to Mia, Anne headed out to the town...and promptly ended up at a loss.

“Well, here I am. What now?”

Perujin’s capital, Auro Ardea, was buzzing with activity. The once-a-year Thanksharvest Festival, combined with the excitement surrounding the “Golden Slope” episode with Mia and Rania, had stirred up a great deal of commotion that continued to fuel passionate discussion. There was a tangible sense of anticipation in the air, as if this year’s festival was somehow going to be different. The town bustled with talk about good omens.

That didn’t make her any less lost, though.

“Wow, I honestly have no idea what I should do.”

She had so much time on her hands and nothing to pass it with. Normally, she’d be off making more connections with the locals, but for some reason, she just couldn’t muster the drive right now. The liveliness, the festive atmosphere—it all felt...empty. She glanced at the gold coins Mia had given her and sighed. She was supposed to get herself something tasty, but what? There wasn’t anything in particular that she wanted to eat.

“Wait... Castillas? What were those again?”

The name came to her out of the blue. She remembered being told by the person in her dream that they were a Perujin specialty. In the dream, the person had said that they were delicious and promised to go eat them together.

“The person in my dream... Wait, who was it? Hmm...”

There was a blank in her memory. She couldn’t recall the person’s identity. Figuring it was the usual fleetingness of dreams, she shrugged and shook her head, putting it out of her mind.

“I wonder what castillas are like? Some sort of cake, I think, but...”

Despite the thing being from her dream, she felt strangely compelled to see if she could find one. Wondering if she could find some being sold, she started walking. Just then, she heard her name called.

“Hey, is that you, Anne?”

Turning around, she came face to face with Princess Rania Tafrif Perujin and another girl serving as her attendant.

“Princess Rania... Good morning.”

“Good morning to you too. What are you doing out here? And where’s Princess Mia? Is she not around?”

Rania glanced around curiously.

“No, Her Highness said she is seeing His Majesty for a private discussion today.”

“A private discussion with father? Really? Huh... Does that mean you’re off for the day? Or are you running some errands for her?”

“A bit of both, I guess. By her order, I’m supposed to relax for the day, so I’m trying to figure out how to pass the time. There’s this cake called...a castilla, I think? And I was thinking of trying one...”

It then occurred to Anne that the word “castilla” had come from her dream. Was it actually a Perujin specialty? Heck, did the thing even exist?

Rania quickly put her fears to rest.

“Oh, castillas? Wow, I’m surprised you’ve heard of them. As far as I know, they’re not really seen outside of here. You sure know your Perujin foods, Anne. Hm... In that case, let me treat you to some.”

“Huh? I can’t possibly—”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Besides, if I can get you to like them, they’ll find their way into Princess Mia’s mouth sooner or later. And once that happens, they’ll have a whole new market in Tearmoon.” Rania gave her a clever wink and gestured at her attendant to lead the way. “All right, let’s go.”

With a grin, she pulled Anne along.

The three of them walked through the town, eventually arriving at a house off the main road.

“Telha lives here,” Rania explained, “and she’s an *expert* at baking castillas.”

As they walked in, a woman greeted them with a warm smile. Judging by her lack of surprise, a messenger had already informed her that they’d be coming.

“Ah, Princess Rania. Welcome.”

“I’m sorry for showing up on such short notice, Telha. I’ve got a guest with me from Tearmoon, and I’d like her to try some castillas. Can you

make some for us right now?"

"No need. I've got some I prepared for the festival, so I can bring you those right away. Come in and make yourselves at home."

As they entered the room and seated themselves at a table, Telha reappeared with a plate. On it sat a tantalizing yellow cake.

"This...is a castilla?"

Anne scooped out a bite-size piece and held it up with her fork. She stared at it for a moment, food and fork trembling together with the motion of her hand. Then, she put it in her mouth.

This is the flavor the person from my dream wanted to share with me...

It was so *sweet*! The second it touched her tongue, she tasted the rich sweetness of honey. Immediately after, the fresh fragrance of floral fields rushed through her nose. Biting into the cake revealed it to be mostly soft yet punctuated by an occasional crunch that was followed by the taste of caramel.

"It's delicious."

It was sweeter than sweet—the kind of euphoric flavor that brightens the day and makes the heart soar. With the world dazzling, her eyes teared a little at the luster of what could have been. Her chest, absent its heart, tightened in the resultant void. If only they could have eaten this together... Surely, they would've thrown their heads back laughing at how ridiculously sweet it was. The scene was all too easy to imagine, which made it all the sadder.

I don't know who that person is...but I really wish we could have shared this...

Why did a fleeting figure from her dream move her so? It confounded her to no end. The person was a figment of her imagination, and yet... After the puzzlement receded, anxiety emerged. It grew and grew, pushing her closer and closer to panic. Never again, she thought against her own understanding, did she want to feel this way. If she could be with that person just one more time, she'd do anything to have a castilla ready. *Anything*.

Wandering through a forest of thoughts, she eventually happened upon an idea.

"Um... Miss Telha? Can I ask you a question? It's probably going to sound weird...and very shameless..."

“Whether it’s shameless is for me to decide. You just have to do the asking. Go on. What is it?”

Telha arched an eyebrow at her, prompting her to continue.

“Could you...teach me how to make castillas?”

“Sure. I don’t see why not.”

Despite Telha’s prompt approval, Anne felt a pang of guilt, for she knew that her request didn’t end there. What she was about to say next was, in her opinion, nothing short of insulting. But she had to say it. Something inside compelled her to do so.

“And...I know this is very disrespectful, but...could you make them without using sugar?”

The words flowed from her seemingly without her conscious control. She didn’t even understand why she asked such a thing. All she knew was that at the center of this strange compulsion was that terribly sad dream she had. For some reason, she felt that even if she were to learn the proper way to make castillas, it wouldn’t work there. In the world of her dream, she had no way of obtaining sugar or wheat. She needed to find a recipe that could be used there. Somehow, she knew it was crucial...

“Without using sugar? What a strange request. Why would you want to do that?”

Telha’s bewilderment was hardly surprising. Anne opened her mouth, only to close it again in frustration. She had no idea how to explain herself.

That was when, to her astonishment, Rania came to her aid.

“Ooh... I know what you’re trying to do. It’s because of what that girl said, right? Tatiana, I think?” Rania smiled, evidently convinced that she’d deciphered Anne’s intention. “Frankly, I agree. Princess Mia does have a sweet tooth, so I get where you’re coming from. It’s probably not good for her to eat too much sugar.”

She nodded contemplatively to herself.

“If the recipe can work with less sugar, it’ll make for a healthier product. Hmmm...”

Finally, she grinned.

“I think it’s a great idea. In fact, I’ll help.”

Telha, likewise, was intrigued by the idea.

“A new recipe, huh? I’ve never even considered such an idea, but it sounds fun.”

Unlike what Anne had expected, she didn't seem to take offense at all. With everyone on board, the three of them moved to the kitchen and began experimenting with the castilla recipe.

"I'm sorry to have troubled you over this..." said Anne.

"Oh don't worry about it. I care a lot about Princess Mia too, so I also want her to stay healthy. I *need* her to. Besides..." Rania gave a toothy grin. "I love it when people take a hammer to existing conventions and make something new out of it. Who knows? Maybe this is the beginning of a new Perujin specialty."

She pulled up her sleeves.

"Still, I know we're not using sugar, but it should be at least a *little* sweet, right? Seems a little too bland otherwise. Hmm... Hey, what if we used fullmoon corn instead of wheat?"

"Fullmoon corn... That's what they use to make those tahkoes things, right?"

"Yes. Flour from fullmoon corn is a little sweeter than regular wheat. If we're not going to use sugar, that natural sweetness might be just right."

Telha nodded in agreement.

"Very interesting. I wouldn't have thought of that. It's a bit of a blind spot for us, honestly."

"What do you mean?" asked Anne.

Telha smiled. "The folks here in Perujin don't really eat wheat. Almost all of it is exported, so we mainly eat fullmoon corn. Castillas are made for special occasions, though, so we traditionally use premium wheat flour to make them. Fullmoon corn flour is sweeter, but when you bake it, it ends up stiffer and not as pleasant to eat. The general consensus is that it's not good for making cakes."

"Which is why," added Rania, "if we can figure out a way to improve the texture of fullmoon corn after it comes out of the oven, we'll essentially have invented an entirely new kind of castilla. Let's give it a try!"

Under Telha's guidance, the three of them began making their experimental castilla. After numerous attempts of trial and error, they managed to bake a castilla whose mild sweetness lent a certain depth to its flavor. Both Rania and Telha gave it a thumbs-up, so Anne thanked her fellow innovators and headed back with their creation in tow.

“I’m so glad we managed to get this made. Milady will be delighted to see—”

Her own words gave her pause.

“Wait... Why am I trying to give milady this castilla?”

Standing motionlessly, she pondered this odd thought. The one she’d promised to eat castilla with was the person from her dream. Which was weird enough—people generally didn’t go around trying to fulfill imaginary promises—but even weirder was how she’d somehow convinced herself that said promise had been made with Mia.

“If I just show up and give her a cake all of a sudden... She’s going to give me funny looks...”

That wasn’t the only concern. Mia had an undying love for sweets. She was also extremely well-informed. Anne couldn’t imagine her sweets connoisseur of a mistress could be unfamiliar with castillas. Despite that, she’d never seen Mia eating one.

Maybe she doesn’t like them...?

She walked the rest of the way back to Mia’s room feeling considerably less confident in the whole idea. Upon entering, she was greeted by a worried voice.

“Anne! You sure spent a long time out there,” said Mia. “I was starting to think something might’ve happened to you. What were you doing?”

“I’m sorry for coming back so late, milady. It’s because I was making this.”

Anne held out the fruit of their extensive experiments—the custom-made castilla.

“My! Is that...a castilla?” Mia’s eyes widened in surprise. Then, she burst out giggling. “My, aren’t we just two peas in a pod!”

She picked up a bag that had been sitting on the table in the room and opened it up. Anne peered in, where she found the very thing she’d had earlier in the day—a tantalizing yellow castilla.

“I got this because I want us to eat it together. We can’t come to Perujin and *not* have one of these, after all.”

Anne breathed out a sigh of relief at Mia’s smile.

“Phew. So you don’t hate these. That’s good.”

“Huh? Why would I hate them?”

“I’ve...never seen you eating one of these before, so...”

“Ah, well. I actually love these. It’s just that... I, uh, hm...”

Mia fumbled for words, then spent a few seconds with her lips pursed in silence.

“I made a promise,” she eventually said. “There was a person who said she’d make one for me, and I agreed to eat it. However, I can never see her again. I never got to fulfill my promise, so I always feel hesitant to eat these...”

“A promise...?”

Anne’s heart skipped a beat. It couldn’t possibly be... That would be ridiculous. It was just a dream. Plus, she and Mia saw each other all the time. It was all so confusing that she pressed a hand to her temple.

“Anne? Is something wrong?”

“Oh... No. But, um... If it’s such an important promise, then you don’t have to force yourself to eat this. I don’t mind,” Anne said hastily.

Mia chuckled. “I wouldn’t have gotten one myself if I didn’t intend on eating it. Besides, I have a feeling that she’d love to have you fulfill the promise in her place. Come on, then. I want to try the one you brought.”

Mia motioned for Anne to join her at the table. As soon as Anne cut up the castilla, Mia forked a piece into her mouth. Her eyes immediately doubled in size.

“My... It tastes...”

“I-I guess you don’t like it very much...”

Mia shook her head at Anne’s anxious remark.

“As a matter of fact, I think it’s quite delicious. It’s certainly less sweet than regular castillas, but that little touch of sweetness it does have makes for a very soothing flavor. But what exactly *is* this?”

“It’s, um...something that I made, actually. I didn’t put any sugar in, and the flour isn’t wheat... It’s made from fullmoon corn.”

“*You* made this? And without using the regular ingredients? What in the moons? Why?”

It was a question Anne had trouble answering. How could she explain? Should she make up an excuse? A moment's indecision quickly solidified into an answer. Anne decided to tell Mia the truth. She couldn't stomach the thought of doing otherwise.

"It's like...a precaution. In case something goes wrong. This way, even if we end up in a situation where we can't find any wheat or sugar anymore, I'll still have a way to make these."

"No wheat or sugar...?"

"Yes. Of course, I'm sure that as long as you're here, things will never get that bad. But...I just felt like I should. I had to. I'm not even sure why myself... Aha ha, I apologize. I must sound like I'm crazy."

Feeling a little silly, Anne laughed at her own expense to lighten the mood. She soon frowned, however, when she realized her humor wasn't being shared.

Mia did not laugh; she didn't even smile. Instead, she wore a most peculiar expression. Her eyes were narrowed, and her gaze was distant. It was as if her mind had drifted away to some faraway place...as if she were recalling fond memories of an old friend...

"Thank you, Anne..."

"Huh?"

For the second time today, Anne's heart skipped a beat. The words, the way they were said... They were all so *familiar*. All of a sudden, she was back in her dream. Someone was in front of her. Someone with whom she'd made a promise.

A promise...with Mi—

Before she could finish the thought, Mia's laugh pulled her from her reverie. It was a small, wry laugh.

"Sorry. I was... Never mind. Forget what I said." Mia turned her gaze toward the remaining portion of Anne's castilla. "Say, Anne... This castilla you made is very good. It really is. I'd love to have father try some. Would it be all right if you baked one for us at the capital some time?"

Then, she smiled. There was something poignant and profound in that smile. In that moment, Anne had the curious feeling that something had finally fallen into place, and it made her want to cry. She wasn't sure how, but she knew that at long last, the castilla had reached the person in her dream. Overcome by a rush of emotion, she opened her mouth to say yes,

but a subsequent rush of mental clarity pushed the word back down her throat. She paled as the implications of the request dawned on her.

Her castilla recipe was fundamentally a substitute meant to be used during times when sugar and wheat were impossible to come by. It was by no means a creation of sufficient quality to present to the emperor.

"I-I couldn't possibly... Why don't we ask the head chef inst—"

"Oh, I know!" Mia clapped her hands together, interrupting Anne's apprehensive response. "I should get involved too. We can make it together. How's that?"

She nodded to herself, evidently impressed with her own idea.

"We'll get father to eat it. Then we'll get Abel, Sion, and Sapphias too. All the boys in the student council will get to appreciate my cooking skills. My, what an excellent idea, if I do say so myself."

Somewhere in the distance, a couple of boys experienced a sudden bout of stomach discomfort, as if their organs had an inkling of what was to come.

"Make one together... In that case, I guess it's okay..."

Faced with Mia's enthusiasm, Anne could hardly say no. In the end, she capitulated and agreed to attempt another making of her castilla.

Some time later, Anne was summoned by the emperor to receive compliments in person. *Many* compliments. The emperor all but showered her with praise. He even gave her a special monetary reward for her service, the whole sum of which she promptly sent to her family. She was paid enough as is, so holding onto it would have made her feel greedy. Anne, you see, felt plenty blessed already.

I wonder why...just getting to make a castilla with milady made me so happy. Like a wish had finally been fulfilled...

Thus ended a short epilogue to a sad dream—a peek past the ending of a story about a simple but broken promise...to see it fulfilled in a different but endearing way.

Mia’s Diary of the Birthday Festival

The Sixteenth Day of the Twelfth Month

Today was the first day of my birthday festival. We threw a party at the Whitemoon Palace. The head chef made some delicious dishes. I asked him to lower the cost of the food this year, but what he came up with tasted even better than before. As always, the vegetable cake was scrumptious.

Of particular note is a new dish—soup made with sweetmoon potatoes. The harmony between the sweetness of the potatoes and the richness of the soup was absolutely superb. It couldn’t taste better. I have nothing but the utmost respect for the head chef’s craft.

The Seventeenth Day of the Twelfth Month

Today was the second day of my birthday festival. I went out to the town. While walking around, I ran into a store selling something called Miacakes. They were cakes made to look like me and were filled with a sweet cream. They tasted great.

I didn’t like how round they were, but it did make for a satisfying amount of cake, so I let the issue slide.

The Twentieth Day of the Twelfth Month

Heaven is eating ice candies in front of a fireplace!

That is all.

The Twenty-Sixth Day of the Twelfth Month

I thought I’d be so busy I wouldn’t be able to write any diary entries, but looking back, I’ve actually logged quite a few. They all ended up being food reports, though. I’ll never understand how that always happens. It must be ghosts or something.

It’s become custom for me to attend a birthday party hosted for me by Anne’s family, and this year was no different. However, I decided to spice things up this time, so I invited all of them to the Whitemoon Palace the

next day. Anne's little brothers and sisters had a blast. Elise said it helped her with her writing too. All in all, it was great.

Now that there's a precedent, if we do end up with a great famine, I can at least shelter her family here in the palace. In fact, I should get them to come here on a regular basis so the guards start remembering their faces.

But moons, it's almost here, isn't it? The great famine. I hope we've stocked up on enough food. I get nervous every time I think about it.

Time to ask Anne to make me a cup of hot milk with lots of sugar. That should help me sleep.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Mochitsuki. How are you all doing?

We're already on the seventh volume. Things go by so fast.

With this volume centered around Mia's Bread-Cake Declaration and the Perujin arc—popular chapters from the web novel—Tearmoon Empire has officially gone on its gastronomic detour.

I have fond memories of when I first posted those chapters for the web novel and received a few reader comments telling me that touching wheat with your bare skin will make it very itchy! I remember going "Yikes!" and fixing the plot for that section. It made me appreciate how the ability to take reader feedback into consideration while adding to or modifying the plot is an advantage of web novels.

On a different note, this volume is being sold through the TO Books online store in special packaged sets that come with things like an alternate replaceable cover, the special short story, and acrylic keychains. It's quite the magnificent lineup. I never thought I'd see the day when Mia would be made into goods like this. It brings a tear to my eye.

Mia: "...I have to say, though, is it just me, or are these special packages a little *too* magnificent? I sure hope the person in charge of this in the empire's administration didn't spend too much money... I'm getting very worried that I'll see mini golden Mia statues or commemorative coins with my face engraved being bundled with the next volume."

Emperor: "Hmmm... Hmmmm!"

Mia: "What the— Father, are you even listening? Wait... I know that look. Whatever you're thinking, stop it, because it's nonsense. The empire's already short on money."

Emperor: "'Nonsense'? It's certainly not nonsense. For an empire to be short on money implies a lack of coinage, does it not? In that case, we can increase the amount of usable money by minting lots of commemorative coins that have your portrait engraved on them. Plus, if they've got your

face on them, even silver coins will be worth as much as gold ones!”

Mia: “I...see? That...makes sense? I think? But...it came from you, so it can’t... Huh. How odd.”

Afterwards, Mia spent a good while listening to her favorite stupid four-eyes explaining how economies work...

And that about sums up volume seven, which may or may not have been a brief lesson on economics. Oh, by the way, volume eight’s special TO Books online store package will include an audiobook that’s worth its weight in giant golden Mia statues, so do check it out if you have the chance!

Now, some words of appreciation.

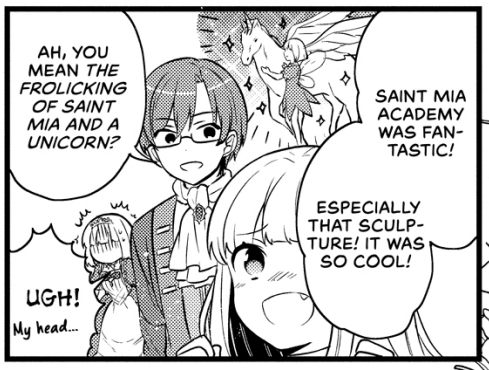
Thank you to Gilse for the adorable illustrations. The alternate cover and inner illustration were wonderful as well.

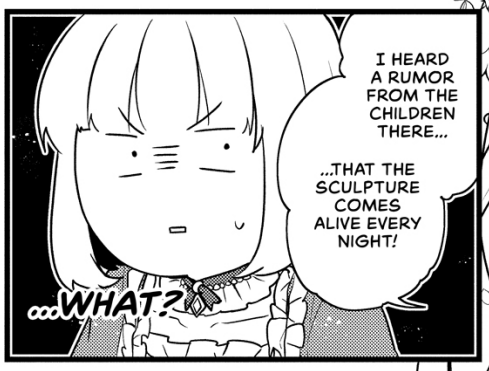
Thank you to my editor, F. You’ve been a great help again.

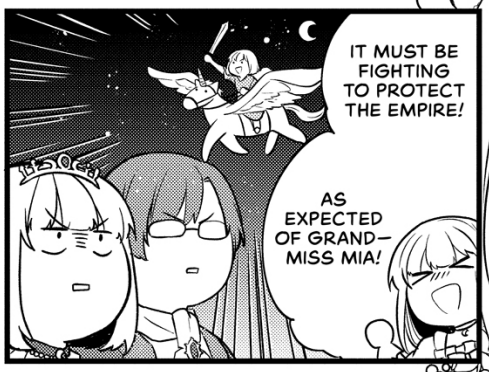
To my family, thank you for your ongoing support.

Finally, thank you to all of you dear readers who picked up this book. Mia’s adventures will continue for a little (...little?) while longer, so I hope you’ll continue to follow her story. See you again in volume eight!

BEL'S DELUSION







THANKS TO LUDWIG SPREADING RUMORS, PEOPLE BEGAN TO WORSHIP THE SCULPTURE.

Bonus Short Story

“O Friend From a Faraway Land...”

The birthday festival of Mia Luna Tearmoon, princess of the Tearmoon Empire, was a grand event that spanned five whole days. This year’s, thanks to the delightfully debaucherous spin she put on it, was especially lively. People reveled more than ever in celebration. Mia herself was no slouch, going on a visiting spree that took her through the domains of numerous nobles and their lavish welcomes. After crossing off the last location on her dizzying travel itinerary, Mia could finally breathe a sigh of relief. But only a single sigh, because that was all the time she had before being hauled off to the next series of events that required her attendance—the birthday parties hosted at each of the Four Dukes’ manors in the capital.

On day one, Mia went to the Bluemoon residence that Sapphias used to call home. Upon arrival, she found its party hall already filled with central nobility who were closely connected with the Bluemoons. These eminent nobles belonged to families that had served the emperor since the days of old. They had illustrious histories and their domains were situated close by on the outskirts of the capital. To these people, Mia’s reformist tendencies made her a thorn in their side.

“Ha ha ha, Mia,” her father chuckled, “you look great in that dress. I mean, you *always* look great, but you look even greater today!”

“Please, Your Majesty. Your flattery is embarrassing.”

“What flattery? There is no flattery here! And call me ‘dad’! I swear, how many times do I have to tell you...?”

She was, however, a thorn they would have to endure in silence. The presence of Matthias, the current emperor, made the prospect of raising grievance an act of lunacy. On top of that, it had only been a few days ago when they’d witnessed firsthand the sheer breadth of her connections—not only the two princes Sion and Abel but also the Holy Lady Rafina. As a

result, the attitude with which everyone greeted her was extremely respectful if not a tad obsequious.

Except for one girl, who boldly walked right up to her with her head held high. Her hair flowed behind her in luxurious waves, and her steps were brisk and steady.

“Your Highness, it’s a wonderful pleasure to make your acquaintance for the first time. My name is Letizia Schubert, and I am Lord Sapphias’s fiancée.”

She smiled elegantly at Mia, her almond-shaped eyes forming endearing curls, and curtsied. Mia returned her an equally affable smile.

“My, so you’re the one... Your father is Marquess Schubert, yes?” Mia chuckled amiably. “I’ve heard so much about you from Sapphias. Maybe a little too much, if I’m allowed to be completely honest. He’s always going on and on about how his fiancée is such a marvelous lady.”

“Goodness... Is that really how he speaks of me?”

Mia’s icebreaking compliment proved effective, earning her a jovial laugh. But before Letizia could respond, a grimacing Sapphias waded in.

“Please, Your Highness. I’d appreciate it if you’d refrain from amusing yourself at the expense of my beloved.”

“If it was at anyone’s expense, Sapphias, it was at yours,” said Mia with a snarky grin, “considering I spoke nothing but the truth.”

Their banter quickly developed an organic rhythm as the conversation hopped from topic to topic, eventually reaching the events of Saint-Noel, which was unfamiliar territory for Letizia. And when Mia began talking about how she’d initially met Sion and Abel and their experiences during the Swordsmanship Tournament...there was a palpable change to the conversational atmosphere!

“Is that so? I had no idea Your Highness also dabbled in the art of cooking...” said Letizia, head lowered contemplatively.

“I certainly do. I made sandwiches before the Swordsmanship Tournament, you know? And they were fine sandwiches. Exemplary creations, truly,” said Mia, twisting facts with the casual ease of a serial hyperbolizer. “They were baked to perfection. Even came out in this brilliantly artistic shape, thanks to an idea I had. The boys absolutely *loved* them.”

Letizia nodded along, evidently fascinated. Slightly unsettled by the

amount of interest his fiancée was showing in the topic, Sapphias moved to interrupt them, only to be interrupted himself.

"Sapphias, come here. There are guests I need you to greet with me." Duke Bluemoon appeared and respectfully acknowledged Mia before turning back to his son. "It is good that you are entertaining Her Highness, but propriety is as important as courtesy. A gentleman knows when to leave ladies to their chatter. Besides, His Imperial Majesty is present today, as are many foreign nobles. We Bluemoons are the host of this gathering, and as the family's eldest son, there is much for you to attend to. This is hardly the time to be engaging in casual banter."

"Ah, I am aware of that, of course. But uh..."

"Go on, Lord Sapphias. I shall keep Her Highness entertained. I do believe I informed you of this arrangement beforehand, yes?" said Letizia in a firm tone.

There was a confidence to her that bespoke an intimate understanding of how to navigate polite society...as well as, perhaps, the makings of a future duchess. Normally, Sapphias would place his unqualified trust in her ability to do so. As princess, Mia had also been educated on the rules and customs of such occasions. There was no reason for him to worry. His brain was sure of it. His gut, however, couldn't rid itself of a vague sense of concern. Just then, another voice joined in.

"Go ahead and tend to your business, Lord Sapphias. Leave the rest to me," said a languid-looking boy.

Letizia's younger brother, Dario Schubert, approached them with the droopy-eyed expression of someone who'd just gotten out of bed.

"Ah, Dario. I suppose it'll be fine if you're here..."

Not sounding entirely convinced, Sapphias nevertheless left with his father, though not without much reluctance and under-his-breath mumbling.

With Sapphias having taken his leave, Mia's bragging...continued unabated.

"So like I was saying, boys simply *love* it when you cook for them. I wouldn't do it all the time, but every once in a while, you can show up with a little something. It'd make for a nice accent to your relationship."

"Hm, hm. Fascinating," said an eagerly-nodding Letizia. "I've thought about it before, but Lord Sapphias is so good at cooking that I rarely have a

chance to try it myself."

"My, that's no good. Hmm... In that case, how about we try cooking together sometime?"

"Cooking together? But..."

Letizia hesitated at the offer, but Mia kept watching her expectantly. So engrossed was she by the prospects of her own idea that she failed to notice the sudden absence of Dario, who'd quietly slid away somewhere.

"Oh, and if we're going to cook together, we might as well invite Esmeralda and Ruby. Rina— I mean, Citrina too. What do you think?"

"With all the Etoilines? I can't possibly—"

"Of course you can. You're the future wife of an Etoiler, aren't you? Don't you think now would be a good time to start getting acquainted with the rest of the Four Dukes and their families?"

In Mia's mind, a plan was brewing.

If I ask Esmeralda, she'd probably say something like, "No noble worth their salt cooks their own food!" I bet Ruby'd be on board, though. I can already see her imagining how she'd cook a homemade meal for Sir Vanos, and it's adorable. Rina's good with compounding things, so she might be a pretty good cook too. It can't be that hard to convince her to come, especially if I tell her Bel's coming too. Then, as long as Anne and Nina show up as well, I think we'll be good to go.

As she entertained this delightful fancy, Sapphias returned.

"H-Hello... My sweet...Letty... Still chatting...with Her Highness?" For some reason, he was breathing with his shoulders. Beside him stood Dario, also panting like he'd run a marathon.

"Goodness, Lord Sapphias. What's the matter? You too, Dario. This is Her Highness's birthday party, you know? It's hardly appropriate to be rushing around like that."

"Oh, I just, you know...suddenly missed you, my dear. Aha ha," said a patently evasive Sapphias. "Speaking of which, you're good at the organ, right? Why don't you play a piece or two for Her Highness?"

"Hm? I certainly don't mind, but why the sudden request?" asked Letizia.

"Well...because I'd like to show Her Highness how talented you are." He turned to Mia. "Forgive me for bragging, but she really is very good. Do have a listen. I'm sure you'll be impressed," he said, hoping she'd take the

bait.

She did not. She didn't even notice him cast his lure, having folded her arms in thought.

"Hm... Tomorrow's the Redmoon party, which means I can invite her there, and then..."

"Your Highness?"

"Hm? What was that? Oh, yes, the organ. That sounds lovely."

She smiled at him. The gesture was in no way reassuring, and he could but gaze warily between the princess and his fiancée.

The next day, Mia attended the party at the Redmoon residence. Situated within Lunatear, it boasted the largest footprint of the Four Dukes' manors, though this wasn't to the credit of the building proper. Rather, it was the courtyard that was enormous. Soldiers from their private army could march through it in rank and file. It was even large enough to be used for cavalry training.

After taking in the sheer breadth of the courtyard, Mia turned toward the party hall. Unlike the outside, where frigid winds howled, warm air permeated the interior of the residence. Today's guests bore little resemblance to those of Bluemoon. Here, it was mostly higher-ups from the Ebony Moon Ministry and military officers, as evidenced by the abundance of sturdy frames and pronounced physiques. Amidst this slightly intimidating air was a leaner form who glided through the crowd to welcome Mia.

Wearing a beautiful crimson dress, Ruby Etoile Redmoon gracefully held the fabric in her fingers and performed a perfect curtsy. After this exemplary display of noble custom, she flashed a far more casual grin.

"Happy birthday, Your Highness."

"Thank you, Ruby. Wait... Is it just me, or is your makeup a little different than usual? You look...cuter."

Ruby froze, apparently caught off guard by the comment. "Huh? I do? I don't remember doing anything special..."

"Ha ha ha. I've noticed that lately, my daughter has been enjoying her work more than ever. Maybe that's why."

A middle-aged man appeared behind Ruby. It was none other than her father. Duke Manzana Etoile Redmoon regarded Mia with a calm but

friendly expression.

"Ah, Lord Redmoon. It's a pleasure to see you."

They traded a round of polite smiles and quick greetings.

"I'm glad to hear that Ruby finds her work to be enjoyable."

"All thanks to Your Highness, of course," said Manzana as he bowed his head. "Please accept my gratitude for entrusting her with a duty that affords her both esteem and fulfillment."

"No, no, if anyone should be grateful, it is me," replied Mia. "Thank you for allowing your daughter to join my guard. She is a great boon and an absolutely inspiring presence."

Mia meant what she said. When Ruby joined the Princess Guard, she also brought a number of her own soldiers, resulting in a slight shift in its gender makeup. Having more women in the Guard made it easier to keep Mia protected at all times—her male guards weren't suitable for all occasions. This was something she appreciated immensely.

When it comes to swinging swords around, Dion's men are the cream of the crop, but they're just so intimidating. *If I take them with me to Saint Mia Academy, they might scare all the children.*

Strength came in a multitude of flavors, and Mia wanted as many as possible in the Princess Guard.

"Your Highness certainly has a way with words..." Manzana grimaced, but it was an amused grimace devoid of bitterness.

It should be noted that for him to display such an expression was no simple feat. A great deal of deliberation, acceptance, and ultimately time had been necessary for him to adopt the necessary perspective. Ruby, after all, was not his only child. He also had sons, all of whom technically had a chance to inherit the throne. If Mia became empress, it would deprive them of that opportunity. That was not an easy pill to swallow. At the same time though, he also knew that deep down, none of his sons were emperor material. Ruby was the only child who displayed the character and caliber necessary to fill that lofty seat. He'd considered the possibility of pushing for Ruby as empress, and if the opportunity were to present itself, he'd be more than willing to throw his full weight behind her in the ensuing power struggle. Cleaving a path to the throne for his daughter should prove a gratifying pursuit.

Mia was about to squash that possibility too. By making the bid herself,

at that.

At the same time, however, she persuaded Ruby to join the Princess Guard, opening up an entirely new avenue of advancement for her. It was a path that, after careful consideration, Manzana realized was perfectly suited to the Redmoons.

Should Mia become empress, she would have a private army to her name, and the most prestigious positions doubtlessly belonged to the imperial guards that ensured her safety. Ruby would be their vice-captain. She'd be commanding Empress Mia's personal guard. Not only would the station afford immense glory, it was also a job whose duties suited Ruby's personality far better than the tedium of the crown.

After seeing the joy on his daughter's face, it didn't take long for Manzana to abandon all interest in fighting for the throne. His attention was now focused elsewhere.

Specifically, he now occupied himself with maximizing his daughter's future clout. Ruby would be the vice-captain of Mia's personal guard, but whether they'd be the Princess Guard or the Empress Guard was still up in the air...and there was a big difference between the two.

If he wanted the greatest advancement for his daughter, having Mia become empress would be the most efficient there. That was the conclusion that gave way to his barbless grimace, and also made clear the path that the Redmoons should take.

None of this, however, had crossed the minds of the two girls before him, who bantered about topics far less cerebral...

"That reminds me, Ruby. There's something I've been thinking about, and I was wondering if you could give me some advice."

"Some advice? Sure. What's the problem?"

"Oh, don't frown like that. It's not that serious. I was just talking to Marquess Schubert's daughter. She's Sapphias's fiancée, and..."

...Far less cerebral, but possibly far more headache-inducing.

"Lady Ruby, a moment please?"

As the party began to wrap up, Ruby heard someone call her name. She turned toward the direction of the voice and frowned in surprise.

"Huh. Now there's a rare face. Didn't think I'd see the scion of the Blues at one of our parties. To whom do I owe this great fortune?"

“To propriety, I suppose. It’d be rude to keep missing your parties year after year. Also, this year’s a little special, right?” answered Sapphias, recalling the Clair de Lune meeting.

“Fair enough,” said Ruby. “What’s the matter then?”

Sapphias didn’t answer immediately, instead scrunching up his face in an expression that screamed “How do I explain this?”

There was a crisis to be averted, and he needed to figure out how. After considering his options and settling on an approach, he prepared to put it to words. Right at that moment, however, he noticed something that gave him pause. Ruby was wearing an expression he recognized—that of a girl hopelessly in love!

“...I wonder what he likes to eat?” she mumbled.

Oh moons... This isn’t going to work.

Sapphias immediately knew that the battle was lost. He was not going to be able to make an ally of Ruby. She was already eagerly imagining herself cooking for the man of her dreams. He pressed at his temples in a vain attempt to quell the emerging headache.

“Say, Sapphias of the Blues, would you happen to know what kind of foods men prefer? Big, sturdy men in particular. Ones with lots of muscle.”

“I can’t say I do...though I do feel there are more of these men around you than me,” said Sapphias, struggling to keep his smile from twitching into a grimace. He shuddered in both fear and awe.

Her Highness’s influence truly knows no bounds.

The day after that...

“Wow...”

The minute Mia stepped into Yellowmoon’s party hall, she let out a sigh of awe.

“What a magnificent display this is...”

Countless confections of kaleidoscopic colors were laid out in a ring on tables. At the center of this circle of delicacies was a massive cake that rose above them all like an empress of sweets. Dressed in a coating of pure white cream, the ivory spire was truly a breathtaking sight to behold. Mia felt herself tremble, not only out of awe but also excitement, for the cake also represented a challenge.

This was, after all, a party held to celebrate her birthday. In other words,

she was the star. This was *her* day. She could eat as much as she wanted, and nobody could fault her for it. Her heart pounded at the thrill of letting herself loose in an environment created specifically to gratify her.

Granted, if she ate *way too much*, then she'd still earn herself a scolding from Anne. She was aware of this, but in the moment, she chose to throw caution to the winds. Sometimes, a girl just had to listen to her heart, and her heart demanded that she start things off by devouring those delicious-looking cookies. Just as she began to chow down...

"Thank you for attending our party, Your Highness. Happy birthday."

Citrina quickly walked up and curtsied. Behind her stood Duke Lorenz Yellowmoon.

"Ah, greetings to you, Rina. And you too, Lord Yellowmoon."

Mia smiled at them, the delightful rush of sugar causing her lips to spread a little wider than she'd intended.

"We Yellowmoons did everything in our power to present Your Highness with the finest selection of desserts. What do you think?" asked Lorenz.

"It's excellent. *Excellent*, I say. They're all amazing. You've left me speechless. I'm having trouble deciding what to try next." She let out a sigh of deep gratification before a thought made her frown. "There is one thing I find a little odd, though... I've been attending Yellowmoon's parties every year, but I've never seen you provide such a jaw-dropping selection of sweets."

"Ha ha ha, but of course. Our goal was always to host the least interesting party possible. A jaw-dropping selection of sweets would be the exact opposite of inconspicuous. The yellows are the weakest of all, remember? We had to keep up our image."

"I see... In other words, this wealth of desserts is proof that the Yellowmoons are finally free."

Devouring them all, then, would be the best way to honor their liberation. Holding back would actually be *rude*. Realizing this, she exhaled, preparing herself to go on an all-out eating spree.

...Not that she ever intended to do otherwise, mind you, but she had just cause now. That was worth a bit of preparatory posturing.

She worked her way through the ring of sweets until she reached the center. Right when she was about to lay siege to the ivory cake spire, a thought suddenly occurred to her, and she spun toward Citrina.

“Oh, by the way, Rina, I’m planning a cooking party with the other members of the Four Houses. Would you care to join us?”

“Um, will Bel be attending?” asked Citrina with a quizzical head tilt.

“Hm...”

Mia pondered for a second before deciding that there was no harm to having Bel make some more connections.

“Yes, I can certainly invite Bel—”

“In that case, sure.”

Mia had barely finished her sentence before getting her answer. The sheer brazenness of Citrina’s decision-making astounded her, who stared at the beaming girl in disbelief.

“Ooh, I can’t wait,” Citrina said to herself excitedly. “I need to practice in advance... I wonder if I can use the things I have in the house... It can’t be that different from compounding...”

Mia shook her head, then returned to her siege of the massive cake.

Meanwhile, Sapphias, after failing to escape the clutches of a group of nobles opposed to Mia becoming empress, spent the day stuck with them in a secret meeting. This frustrated him to no end, as he had far more pressing concerns than succession debates to attend to. His very well-being was currently at stake! Afterward, he’d pass the names of all the nobles in the meeting to Mia, figuring it was fair payback for literally endangering his life.

This was no laughing matter!

The day after that, it was time for the last of the birthday parties, hosted by the Greenmoons.

“Hmm... I’m pretty sure Esmeralda will be against the idea. How should I approach this...?” Mia muttered.

Ideally, her cooking party would be a “Mia and the Ladies of the Four Houses” affair (Schubert would be representing the Bluemoons, but that was a mere technicality), but that would require Esmeralda to participate. How could she convince her?

“She’s going to say something about how prominent noble ladies don’t cook for themselves. I just know it. But if I don’t invite her, she’ll probably make a fuss about that too. Hrrrngh... What do I do...?”

As she walked into the hall, she found Esmeralda waiting for her.

“Greetings, Esmeralda.”

Immediately upon seeing her face, however, she noticed something was wrong.

“Greetings, Miss Mia. Welcome to the Greenmoon manor.”

Esmeralda smiled, but there was something stiff about the expression.

“Hm? Is something the matter?” Mia asked. “You don’t seem yourself...”

That sent Esmeralda into a fit of nervous fidgeting. The whole time, she kept her arms behind her back.

“U-Um, Miss Mia, I uh...have a present for you... You know how you said before that you prefer handmade, original items, even if they don’t cost much? You probably forgot, but...”

“Uh... Of course I said that. I didn’t forget. How could I?”

Mia had definitely forgotten.

The event in question had happened on Saint-Noel Island when, on one of her days off, Mia had been walking around town and ran into Esmeralda who was in the middle of shopping. Specifically, she was looking for a birthday present for Mia. Seeing that she was on the verge of buying a ridiculously expensive gem, Mia immediately stopped her and asked her to look instead for smaller, cheaper gems that could be used in handmade accessories, saying “I don’t mind if it’s cheap, but I’d prefer a handmade present that’s one of a kind.”

“Did you...actually make one?”

Esmeralda nodded wordlessly. Her reddened cheeks betrayed her embarrassment.

Mia, for her part, had not seen this coming at all. Never in her wildest dreams would she have expected Esmeralda to take such advice to heart. After the initial shock wore off, however, she began to feel warm and fuzzy inside. Not only Esmeralda had remembered her request, she actually complied. What did she make?

“May I...see it?” asked Mia, her anticipation growing.

Esmeralda fidgeted even more nervously.

“Um... Sure, but don’t get your hopes up, okay? I’m...not very good at this...” Esmeralda said sheepishly as she held out a small wooden box.

Mia took it and, with an almost reverent amount of care, opened it.

Inside was a brooch. It was slightly larger than most, about the size of her palm, and a number of tiny gemstones were arranged somewhat clumsily along it. She could all but envision Esmeralda fumbling her way through the process, trying her best to set the gems. The thought struck a chord with her, and she couldn't help but laugh. As she did, she pinned it to her dress at her chest.

"Ah... Ha ha, yes, it's laughably bad, isn't it? Um, you don't have to put it on—"

"Thank you, Esmeralda. This...just made my day." Mia looked Esmeralda in the face and smiled. "I'll cherish it like the treasure it is."

It took a few seconds before Esmeralda remembered how to pick her jaw back up. Then...

"Oh! Well, do take good care of it then!"

She *beamed*.

Mia observed her for a moment.

You know what... I think this might be easier than I thought.

"Say, Esmeralda," she said, sensing a certain receptiveness in her friend, "I'm organizing something, you see..."

Before long, Esmeralda had signed up for her cooking party.

Now, while Mia and Esmeralda were putting on their moving display of friendship, something else was happening behind the scenes.

Nina, Esmeralda's maid, was busy with tasks that took her in and out of the party hall. During one of her trips, she felt a sudden tug on her arm.

"Who's— Lord Sapphias? Is something the matter?"

He pulled her toward a secluded corner of the hallway, whereupon her normally stolid face was forced to adopt an expression of surprise by the sheer oddness of his behavior.

"Yes, actually," he whispered. "There's a tiny little emergency I'm dealing with..."

"A tiny little...emergency?"

Nina arched her eyebrow at the oxymoronic phrase. Sapphias probably intended to smile, but his twitching cheeks made it seem more like a desperate plea for help.

"Listen. Something terrible is about to happen, and I'd like your help to stop it. No, I *need* your help. You're the only one I have left..."

Thus, it was decided that the Four-Etoiline (technically three plus one future duchess) Cooking Party feat. Mia would proceed. As for how the event unfolded... That would have to be a story for a different time.

All that can be said right now is that by the time it finished, there wasn't much left of Sapphias aside from an empty husk of a man, so thoroughly burnt out that he on the verge of turning to dust.

"Aaah, Keithwood. I wonder how the man is doing... One of these days, we need to get a drink again..."

Lying in a pool of his own exhaustion, Sapphias would fondly recall the name of a friend from a faraway land.

He lived. Maybe not happily ever after, but he lived.

Mia's Fine Foods Travel Diary —Eat Till You Drop in Perujin —

Going to Perujin is a pretty special occasion, so I decided to change things up by buying a new diary. From today on, I'm going to start writing entries here. One entry a day. No slacking off. Also, they'll be proper entries. Not just a list of things I ate.

Perujin Trip Day One

Today, I crossed the border between the empire and Perujin. It was still bright out when I arrived at the village. There, I experienced for the first time the wonders of this rare fruit known as rubyfruit. It has this refreshing sweetness, and it's really juicy. It's great and I love it!

I'm now convinced that there are few things in life more luxurious than eating freshly picked rubyfruits on the spot. They're soft and fragile, so transporting them is apparently a headache, making it very difficult to find any in the empire. It's such a terrible shame. I want to do something about this, but I don't know how. Can improvements be made to the horse carts? To make them shake less, for example? Or maybe they can put some soft cloth inside the boxes that hold the fruits? I wonder if anything can be done...

*I checked out non-food things too. I'm doing pretty good so far, so I

hope to keep it up.

Perujin Trip Day Three

I arrived at the second village.

Today, I helped with harvesting these things called Perujin berries and had a taste-testing session on the spot. They're little black beads that look like early harvest grapes, but not as soft. Biting into them, I was surprised that they were more sweet than sour. I'm pretty sure I could have spent all day eating them if Anne didn't stop me.

When I asked the villagers, they told me that these things make for a delicious jam too. You spread it over tahkoes, and it tastes great. I think I'll try some tomorrow morning. I must say though, getting to compare freshly-picked ones with jam is quite the luxury. What a wonderful experience that will be.

Apparently, they're great for pies too. What a versatile ingredient! I want to bring some back with me to the empire.

Today's entry was also about food, but it involved some thinking about how to make use of their culinary properties in the empire, so it's fine. It's not good to be too strict about these things.

*I had nothing to write about yesterday, so I skipped an entry. It wasn't my fault. I just had nothing to write about.

Perujin Trip Day Five

I arrived at the third village.

I've been waiting for this. It's time to pick grapes. I've been itching to do this ever since there was talk about a trip to Perujin.

This village plants a number of grape varieties, so there's not just the regular purple ones but also yellow ones called mooncat grapes, as well as red ones that can be eaten with the skin called sun grapes.

For the picking session, I got to pick sun grapes. I ate a few on the spot, and words cannot describe how good they were. This occurred to me when I had rubyfruits and Perujin berries too, but eating fruits when they've just been picked is truly a wonderful experience.

Apparently, in addition to eating them as is, grapes can also be made into juice. I tried some. It didn't have the alcoholic taste of wine, but the flavor is fresh and striking. Perfect for quenching thirst after a good

picking. With that said, the fact that the grapes were so fresh did make it seem a bit of a waste to mash them into juice.

Quality fruits really are best eaten as is.

Perujin Trip Day... Something

I'm at the capital, Auro Ardea, which they call the skyward village of gold. I brought a brand new diary for the Perujin trip, but somehow, the entries all turned into my usual food reviews again. It simply defies explanation.

More importantly, something wonderful happened today. Anne made a castilla for me. Apparently, she asked Rania for help, and they figured out a special recipe that's not the normal way to make it. According to her, they didn't use wheat flour or sugar...but it still tasted sweet. It was very mild, but it was just the right amount of sweetness. I could also taste just enough of the fullmoon corn to make the whole flavor pop. Honestly, I think it might be even better than regular castillas.

It's so good that I need to get Father to try this. Abel too, and also the rest of the student council. I think I'll practice the recipe until I'm used to it so I can make it together with Anne next time.

I do wonder what motivated her to try making it without wheat flour or sugar, though. It's almost as if she remembers what happened back then. I mean, it's certainly true that there was no way we could find any flour or sugar in that world...but she can't possibly have any memories of that time.

Then again, Anne didn't seem quite herself today. Something about her was strangely reminiscent of the other Anne. Maybe she somehow remembered...

No, that's not it. The person who made the castilla today was undoubtedly *this* Anne. She made it for me. I still have to thank her properly. I should also go say hi to Rania. I wonder what would make a good gift for her...

That reminds me, the last time we talked, she was worrying about her country's future. What was it again? I think she was trying to come up with some sort of new and innovative way to bring in foreign money. It'd be nice if I could give her some good ideas. That'd be a good way to thank her.

I'd say it all comes down to Perujin's strengths, which are food and agriculture. The only problem is that I don't know nearly enough to be

commenting on how to grow crops, much less coming up with innovative ideas.

There must be something I can do though. If I can make use of this experience I just had... Build a town with food as its theme, maybe? After all, there are towns with schools as its theme, like academy cities, so I don't see why they can't have a town with food as a theme.

For example, they can have lots of fields around the town and make it so people can go fruit-picking there. As long as they make sure there are delicious fruits available, they can probably convince nobles to go there on pleasure trips.

Wait... Is it just me, or does this actually sound like a pretty good idea? This way, I'll be able to come every summer. I'd love to go fruit-picking with Abel.

What an excellent idea, if I do say so myself. I'd better write this down so I don't forget.

Any other feasible ideas? Hm... A mushroom-shaped house? A tree that's actually candy? Both sound pretty interesting. Maybe they can make another castle out of cake. Oh, they can also get everyone to wear mushroom costumes. That sounds like a lot of fun too. Finally, they can fill the streets with delicious Perujin cuisine.

If they build a town like that, I feel like it'll motivate Anne to practice cooking again. I can also bring the head chef and have him learn all the recipes so he can expand his repertoire.

Learning recipes, huh... You know what? We should set up a course in my academy where people learn how to cook. I'll hire a lecturer from Perujin who's good at cooking... Wait, there's no need to limit it to Perujin. I should make it so students can learn to cook things from other kingdoms too.

Sunkland food... Equestrian Kingdom food... Those both sound pretty promising. Belluga and Remno too. I wonder what food from Abel's home town tastes like...

As soon as I get back, I need to have a chat with Headmaster Galv. That's something to look forward to.

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by Nozomu Mochitsuki

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Edited by Samantha J. Moore

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